THE BARON'S FANCY

GLEB BOTKIN

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FIRST EDITION

THE BARON'S FANCY

CHAPTER ONE

BARON MAXIMILIAN NIKOLAEVICH VON Waldenscherna had adapted himself measurably well to the democratic ways of the United States of America. The few members of the Russian colony in New York who still accused him of snobbishness must have forgotten the old Russian saying, "Every baron has his own fancy." Indeed barons of Germanic ancestry have always been famous in Russia for their fanciful ways. They were unable to forget the Middle Ages, when every baron was practically a sovereign. Accordingly they still considered themselves somewhat superior to the rest

of mankind and entitled to follow their own personal whims rather than the laws and customs of the country.

True that Maximilian's ancestors were not Germans but Swedes. Also, they had married for generations Russian ladies, and for the last hundred years had belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church. Maximilian considered himself a pure Russian. In fact, he was a pure Russian except perhaps for his long and narrow head with curly blond hair, light eyes, and aquiline nose. In regard to his inner personality, the only Nordic traits he possessed were a considerable industriousness, an innate optimism, and a humble gratitude to God for having made him a Baron von Waldenscherna. Not that Maximilian considered other people to be his inferiors, but he thought that it was pleasant to be a Baron von Waldenscherna.

Of this, however, he tactfully refrained from speaking to anybody. His only and unconscious manner of honoring his own title was that of respecting the titles of others. For instance, it gave him a great pleasure to be invited to dinner by Her Highness Duchess Irina Mihailovna von Lichtenfelsen, a third cousin of His Late Majesty the Emperor of Russia. In his correspondence with her Maximilian always addressed the Duchess by her

full title, even though, having married an American citizen, she was legally a plain Mrs. James W. Brooks. But Maximilian believed that a duchess remained forever a duchess, and that imperial blood was a sufficiently strong solution not to be affected by the watery contents of the veins of some American citizen. Of course, it was a pity that Duchess Irina Mihailovna had stooped to such a mésalliance. But after all, Jimmy Brooks was a nice chap, and his American millions enabled the Duchess to live in regal splendor at a time when most of her relatives had to exist in poverty and earn their own living as best they could.

Maximilian—or, as his friends called him, Max—arrived at the Long Island estate of Duchess Irina Mihailovna at exactly five minutes to seven. A solemn butler bowed him into the drawing room, announcing that Her Highness would be right down. Max clasped his hands behind his back and plunged into an examination of a Rembrandt that hung above the sofa. Himself an artist, Max never could admire this Rembrandt enough. But he also could never look at it without wondering how the Duchess dared keep such a priceless painting in her country house. The house was a wooden one. Max doubted that in case of fire either the Duchess herself or Jimmy Brooks would remember the painting.

Aside from this the house was damp, which alone was damaging to the picture.

"Ach, my dear old friend," Max addressed the Rembrandt. "Let me admire you while you are still with us."

Max was still absorbed in the examination of the old masterpiece when a small black dog approached him, growling. Turning around, Max saw the Duchess, tall, slender, her dark hair freshly waved, her deep brown eyes smiling, beautiful in her gown of silvery blue velvet. Every time that he saw her Max remembered that ridiculous Russian merchant Baliassoff. Baliassoff was a republican and always sneered at royalty. He used to say that Duchess Irina Mihailovna looked just like any American stenographer. Perhaps a merchant could honestly believe such a preposterous thing. But Max, who was both an aristocrat and an artist, could have recognized Duchess Irina in any crowd for the lady of royal blood that she was. As always at her sight, Max's face dissolved in a smile of respectful admiration. Taking a few steps forward, he bowed in the graceful manner of a courtier. The Duchess smiled at him benevolently through her tortoise lorgnette and gave him her hand, which he kissed warmly.

"I am so glad you could come," Irina said in her musical voice, pronouncing the Russian words with

a charming English accent, just as she spoke English with a Russian accent. "Permit me to make you acquainted with my uncle, Prince Constantine."

Max noticed only now a stoutish, bald-headed man with a clipped blond mustache, who stood behind the Duchess. Prince Constantine, Max knew, was a member of a Balkan royal family. But the Prince was also a cousin of the late Russian emperor. Max felt no particular respect for Balkan royalty, but a cousin of the Czar—that was different.

"Very, very glad to meet you, my dear Baron," exclaimed the Prince in a thin voice, shaking Max's hand as if it were a cocktail shaker and wriggling with his hips. "My niece told me so much about you and your art. I loved so much your late father. Very, very glad to meet you. What language shall we talk, Russian, French, English? Makes no difference to me—make your choice. Eh, Irina, what language shall we talk, eh, what do you say?"

Irina Mihailovna shrugged her beautiful muscular shoulders and chuckled: "Whatever the Baron prefers. What would you choose, Maximilian Nikolaevich?"

"Being unable to speak any language in perfection, I have no preference, Irina Mihailovna," he answered.

"Well, but we are in an Anglo-Saxon country,

aren't we?" exclaimed the Prince, shuffling with his feet. He pulled a handkerchief out of the cuff of his soft evening shirt, displaying a heavy golden bracelet, pushed the handkerchief back into the cuff, and took it out again. "Suppose, then, we talk English. Ha-ha, doesn't this present a happy solution?"

The Prince giggled, and Max raised his right eyebrow and let his monocle drop into his pretty, feminine hand. It rather pleased him that his hands were smaller than even those of Duchess Irina. Max's intimate friends knew that when he dropped his monocle it meant that he was astonished. Max was quite astonished indeed, and, while preserving outward silence, he inwardly addressed the Prince: "My dear chap, you look to me like a clown. Why are you fidgeting all the time as if you had a pin in your seat? Can a prince of royal blood have no more dignity than that? But then, of course, you are a Balkan prince." He chuckled at the thought that it was decidedly nicer to be a Baron von Waldenscherna than a Balkan prince and inserted the monocle back into his eye.

"Ah, here are the cocktails! Well, let's drink a cocktail. Say, Irina, your Jimmy isn't coming tonight, is he?"

"No."

"Getting drunk again, I suppose?"

"Very likely. What do you expect from such a fool?"

This statement of the Duchess caused Max to drop his monocle again. This was perhaps his only criticism of Her Highness. She would refer to her husband in public as a fool. Of course, Jimmy, in spite of his millions, was but a proletarian. But, after all, he was her husband, even though a left-hand husband, so to speak. It jarred Max to hear the Duchess talk about Jimmy in this manner. He took his cocktail and drank it slowly, but without taking his lips away from the glass, until it was empty.

"You smoke?" Prince Constantine pushed under Max's nose an enormous silver cigarette case.

"Thank you." Max turned to the Duchess. "May I?"

"Please."

The Prince lighted Max's cigarette with his golden lighter. "Imagine!" he exclaimed. "A lighter that works, ha-ha. But what about dinner—what about dinner, my dear Irina? Your poor uncle is beastly hungry. When are we going to be fed in this place? Ha-ha!"

"I think the dinner is ready."

Irina went slowly to the dining room.

"After you, after you, if anything is left of it, ho-ho!" exclaimed Constantine, pushing Max

through the door. "If anything is left of it, ha-ha-ha-ha!" he repeated, evidently much pleased with his joke.

"I feel all broken up to-day," Irina said to Max when they had sat down at the dinner table. "I was riding, and my horse threw me again. All my thighs are black and blue—terrible." She pushed herself away from the table and, pointing with her long finger at different spots on her thighs, said: "Here, and here, and here . . ." Her finger was moving higher and higher, away from the knees. She suddenly stopped and looked at Max with astonishment. "Ach, but I'm so absent-minded." She giggled, and Max smiled, hoping to make the Duchess understand that he was charmed with her absent-mindedness.

"You'll kill yourself some day," laughed the Prince. "Women can't ride astride. They have fat thighs but no muscles. You need muscles to keep yourself on a horse. Women's thighs weren't meant for that at all, ha-ha-ha-ha, what do you say, my dear Baron, ha-ha-ha-ha?"

"Now, now, my dear uncle!" Irina reprimanded him smiling.

"Well, I didn't start this, did I? You began to discuss your thighs, ha-ha."

"It was sheer absent-mindedness, which you were

not supposed to notice. Incidentally, Maximilian Nikolaevich, I have a business offer for you."

"Really? Well, nowadays I feel always anxious to discuss business."

"I have an order for you to make a portrait."

"Yours, I hope?"

"No, not yet. I wouldn't want you to work for nothing, and Jimmy is so stingy. I'm always penniless. Still, I hope to be able to arrange it in the future. For the present, however, it is my cousin Alexandra I want you to paint. It will be well paid for by a foolish old American woman, Miss Emmy Dill Jones, whose guest she is."

"Do you mean to imply that one has to be foolish to pay well for my masterpieces, O Highness?"

"No, that wasn't what I meant at all. It is spending money on portraits of Cousin Alexandra that strikes me as foolish. She isn't exactly a beauty. But then I think you knew her in Russia."

"Oh, you mean the Duchess Alexandra Petrovna?"

"Exactly. She has ever been a nuisance and so arrogant. She, you know, is not just a plain highness as I am, but an imperial highness, a Duchess von Lichtenfelsen. She never forgets that. But I'm sorry for her. She has had such unpleasant experiences and married even worse than I did."

"I've heard something about that. But I never could get it straight. She recently came here, didn't she?" asked Max.

"Yes, she did. Well, you see, she couldn't get out of Russia, has been twice imprisoned and what not. Finally some German Jew offered to get her out. He was a war prisoner or something, and could get her out of Russia as his wife. But she had to marry him fictitiously. So she became a Mrs. Rosenkranz, which is ever so much worse than even a Mrs. Brooks. On top of all it appears that this heroic Mr. Rosenkranz had his own ideas about fictitious marriages. Anyway, she had a child."

"Little Isaac, eh what?" Prince Constantine giggled.

"Well, I don't know, it's sort of complicated, anyway. As a matter of fact, I don't feel at all certain that it is a little Isaac, or, if it is one, that it is that poor wretch Rosenkranz who is responsible for that. Somehow it doesn't look so probable that a miserable Jew like that would dare to do any such thing, especially without her consent. Be that as it may, Alexandra finally lost somewhere both Mr. Rosenkranz and little Isaac, and she doesn't like at all to be reminded of them. So when you are going to meet her don't start your conversation by asking: 'And how is Mr. Rosenkranz?' "

"Now you've ruined him!" exclaimed Prince Constantine. "Never give this kind of warning. Now he's certain to ask her just that. You remember Prince Andronikoff? They'd kicked him out of the Corps of Pages. So his friends advised him to appeal to old Grand Duke Mihail Nikolaevich, who had a special liking for all those apes from the Caucasus. The Grand Duke used to take a daily walk along the English Quay. So they said to Andronikoff: 'Go to the English Quay, and when you see the Grand Duke just approach him, tell him who you are, and explain your situation. You can be certain of his help. Only don't mention two things to him. Don't say that Pobedonostzeff is going to be appointed his assistant, because he hates the man. And don't say that rumors have it that the Grand Duke is suffering from cancer.' Now Andronikoff would never have said anything of the sort, because he never heard about those things before. But when he met the Grand Duke he was so confused that he forgot all he had to say and finally asked: 'Your Imperial Highness, is it true that Pobedonostzeff is going to be appointed your assistant?' The Grand Duke growled: 'What?' and Andronikoff lost his mind completely and screamed: 'Your Highness, everybody in town says that you have cancer!' Then the Grand Duke took him by the collar and gave him such a kick in the pants that he

flew right across the street. And as Andronikoff told me later himself: 'The worst of it was that it happened right under the windows of Princess Obolensky.'" Prince Constantine leaned back and began to roar with laughter. "So you see, it's going to be the same with our dear baron. He'll enter Alexandra's room and ask: 'How is the precious health of your beloved consort Mr. Rosenkranz?' Ha-ha-ha."

"God save you from doing anything like that," Irina said to Max. "Alexandra will annihilate you."

"Is the Duchess so severe? I have a recollection of her as of a very sweet child."

"Oh, she can be sweet if she wants to. But we nicknamed her Ivan the Terrible. She can be fierce," laughed Irina.

"You frighten me," said Max.

"Oh, you oughtn't to be afraid of any physical damage, for she is very frail. But she kills people simply by rolling her eyes at them. You know, she seriously hopes to become an empress of Russia, some day."

"An empress? But she has no right of succession."

"That is, no more than any of us," said Irina, who didn't seem to like this last remark. "But then, you see, she hopes to win her father's fortune, and if she does gain control of so much money, she might actually become of consequence politically."

"Why does she have to try to gain it?" asked Max. "Isn't she the only heiress now? I thought that her sister and brother had been killed."

"Yes, but that's just where the trouble with Mr. Rosenkranz comes in. My uncle Peter was very much opposed to any mésalliances and attached some condition to his will disinheriting such of his descendants who would marry commoners. Accordingly Aunt Mavrikia now claims the fortune, but Alexandra is trying to have her marriage annulled."

"But this would make our dear little Isaac illegitimate!" exclaimed Prince Constantine. "This would be terrible. Poor little Isaac, ha-ha-ha! Can a scion of the noble house of Rosenkranz bear the stigma of illegitimacy, ho-ho-ho?"

"But if he's illegitimate he would become a Duke von Lichtenfelsen," observed Max.

"By gad, so he would!" screamed Prince Constantine. "Imagine, Duke Isaac von Lichtenfelsen. A wonderful addition to the Almanach de Gotha. I shudder even to contemplate any such possibility. No, no, my dear Irina, can't you do something to make it impossible for Alexandra to annul her marriage? We don't want any Isaacs in the family, ha-ha-ha."

"I don't think we have to worry much," smiled Irina. "In fact, I don't see how Alexandra could ever

succeed in winning her case. The joke is that she would have difficulty to prove even that she is a Duchess von Lichtenfelsen. The only papers she has are all in the name of Mrs. Rosenkranz. If Aunt Mavrikia would choose to disavow her as her niece it wouldn't be so good for Alexandra."

"But how could Duchess Mavrikia Alexandrovna do anything like that? After all, everybody knows who Duchess Alexandra Petrovna is," said Max.

"Of course everybody knows it, but who would want to participate in such a dirty mess?" said Irina. "I, for one, should hold myself aloof from any such business."

"But you know, it's a fact that not all people would even believe that Alexandra is indeed Alexandra," said Prince Constantine. "Some damnable American said to me only recently, right to my face: 'Oh, that woman who lives with Emmy Jones is an impostor.' Can you beat it? That's what gets my goat. One meets impostors on every street corner, and half of them are being received like real princes. Why, I've heard that the Vanderbilts have given a dinner in honor of the heir to the Russian throne. Imagine!"

"I've heard about that too," said Max. "It was Baron Toben who finally deciphered him."

"You mean that little blond cootie, Toben, who used to serve on the imperial yacht?"

"That's the one. He was invited for a luncheon with that heir to the throne, and talked to him all the time as if he had recognized him fully. Called him Imperial Highness and everything. And then he suddenly asked: 'But how is it that your eyes have completely changed their color?' So this heir to the throne answered without blushing: 'You see, when I was trying to escape from Ekaterinburg a Red Guard hit me with something heavy on the head, and that changed the color of my eyes.' So, naturally, someone present hit the heir again with something heavy on the head and threw him down the dumb waiter."

"Ha-ha-ha," roared Constantine. "That's great. But, all jokes aside, you know that even I once had my identity questioned."

"How was that?"

"Well, I was traveling in Switzerland. In the dining car some cheeky German sat at my table and asked me who I was. So I told him that I was Prince Constantine, and the damn fool began to roar with laughter. I asked him: 'What are you giggling like an idiot for?' And he said: 'You Prince Constantine?' I said: 'Why, yes, I am Prince Constantine. What's wrong about that?' And he said: 'Anybody can tell

that you're not a prince. You look at best like a candle boiler.' Imagine! And why a candle boiler? What do candle boilers look like, anyway? So I told him that he was a thrice accursed fool and that when we should arrive at Zürich he should call up my hotel and ask whether they were expecting me. He did as I told him, but imagine my luck, they had just changed the clerk at the hotel, and that new imbecile answered: 'Prince Constantine? Never heard of him.' You can imagine how that German ass giggled after that. Why, wherever I went in Zürich, there he was standing with a band of friends and yelling at me: 'Look at the candle boiler!' This was a terrible experience, I assure you."

"It must have been," agreed Max. But he could feel no indignation against "that German ass." Max had never seen a candle boiler, but it now occurred to him that Prince Constantine actually possessed an appearance very suitable for that unusual profession. "I once met a Russian countess," Max said. "But I made her talk Russian and saw at once that she was a Jewess and of the lower classes. So I asked her what her religion was, and she admitted it was Jewish. I said to her: 'But then you possibly couldn't be a Russian countess. We were forbidden by the Church to marry Jewesses.' And she answered: 'I

know, but you see, I used to sleep with a Russian count.' "

"Wonderful! Inimitable!" exclaimed Prince Constantine. "I must remember that. I used to sleep with a Russian count. Ha-ha-ha! But that would make the whole world full of Russian countesses. Yet that woman was naturally believed by everybody to be a real countess?"

"Of course she was," said Max. "But when Felix Youssoupoff was here some American said: 'Oh, I'm tired of meeting all those fake Russian princes.' "

"Very characteristic, very characteristic," said Prince Constantine. "These Americans are really incredibly stupid. They can't tell a prince from a garbage man."

"Oh, well, they haven't had enough experience," suggested Max.

"What I hate about them is their nerve," said Duchess Irina. "Take that case of Queen Ermenia. It was simply an outrage."

"I'm afraid I don't know it," said Max.

"Oh, you see, after the Queen had to leave her country she remained quite penniless. She knew some wealthy Americans, and they offered to support her. I must admit that they supported her in a truly regal fashion, but imagine her embarrassment when she learned that those awful Americans were saying

freely to their friends that they were supporting the Queen Ermenia."

Max dropped his monocle. "But they actually were supporting her?" he remarked.

"Of course they were. But how did the brutes dare to talk about it? You don't think that it was pleasant for the Queen to have it generally known that she was supported by some sort of Americans? Why, my relatives sneer even at me for being supported by Jimmy, even though he is my legitimate husband."

This time Max had difficulty to refrain from smiling. Poor Jimmy Brooks was bitterly complaining everywhere that ever since he had married Duchess Irina all European royalties were sponging on him mercilessly. It amused Max to think that they sneered at the same time at Irina, the only one of them who could take Jimmy's money without blushing.

"Americans have their good points, you know," Prince Constantine said, casting a suspicious glance at Max. Max's failure to get very indignant over the tactless friends of Queen Ermenia probably made the Prince fear that Max was too Americanized himself. "I have some very good friends among them," he continued. "But, on the whole, they're pretty crude. Of course, I don't blame them. What can you expect from a nation of shopkeepers?"

"You remind me of my English governess," said

Max. "She was a fierce creature with a black mustache and made me study the dictionary by heart. I never got beyond the half of the letter 'A.' Her worst rebuke to me was: 'You speak like an American.' In those days I knew next to nothing about Americans, but I asked her once why she hated them so much. She answered: 'I don't hate them, but we Britishers can't have much respect for our former lackeys and cooks.' So ever since I have imagined that all English lackeys and cooks ran away from England, and that it was in this fashion that America was populated."

"Well, that's practically how it happened," said Duchess Irina.

After dinner they returned to the drawing room, where coffee and liqueurs were served. Prince Constantine became absorbed in the reading of the Almanach de Gotha, for he wanted to remember who was the mother of one of the Dukes of Leuchtenberg, but neither Irina nor Max could enlighten him on the subject.

"Be careful lest the Almanach demoralizes you, Uncle," said Duchess Irina. "You know," she turned to Max, "there are three German princes who were all married. Then all of them were divorced and they remarried one another's wives. That is to say, there remained the same three princes married to

three princesses of the same name, but coupled in a different way. The result was a terrible confusion, and nobody could get it straight. So I took the Almanach de Gotha and studied it for days, until I got it all quite clear. Then I began to explain it at dinner to my mother. She had a few guests at dinner, among them her lady in waiting, an old maid of some eighty years of age. After the dinner my mother called me to another room and bawled me out terribly for telling indecent stories in the presence of a virgin. And I didn't say a word except what I had read in the Almanach de Gotha."

"It appears to be the same in all families," said Max. "Our parents still think us to be little children and always suspect us of wickedness."

"Exactly, and why should they? It surpasses my comprehension. But to come back to my business offer: Would you undertake to paint a portrait of Cousin Alexandra? She lives now with an old American woman, Miss Emmy Dill Jones, the funniest creature you've ever met. But she's very wealthy and so flattered to entertain an imperial highness in her house that she'll give all her money away to satisfy Alexandra's whims. And now, if you please, Alexandra wants her portrait made, and Miss Jones asked me to recommend a good painter. So I immediately thought of you."

"I am really touched."

"Better wait with any expressions of gratitude. As I said before, Alexandra is not an easy person to handle. She can be very charming, but she can also be very dreadful. You'll have to be constantly on your guard. She's always been the *enfant terrible* of our family. Besides, since the revolution she has developed an awful dislike for Russians and everything Russian. She even refuses to talk Russian. You'll have to talk to her either in German or in English. Also, I would suggest that you try to make her portrait very beautiful. This won't be easy, because she isn't in the least pretty. But then that's what you are an artist for!" She giggled. "So this, then, is the proposition, Max. I don't recommend it to you, but am simply telling you about it."

Max loved to hear the Duchess address him by his pet name, as she did sometimes, especially after drinking wine, which made her less observant of etiquette. "I accept it," he said, "and I want to kiss your dear little hands for it. Regardless of the financial side of it, which naturally counts with me a great deal, I shall be really happy to renew my acquaintance with Duchess Alexandra Petrovna, and somehow I trust that I may be able to get along with her nicely."

"You may. One never can tell with Alexandra.

But, whatever you do, don't fall in love with her," Irina said with a mischievous little smile.

Max felt tempted to tell the Duchess that nobody who knew her could fall in love with anybody else. But he did not dare. He often wondered how it was possible to make love to her. At times she seemed not only accessible, but even provoking. One time she drove him to her estate in her car and later laughed herself to tears because he hadn't guessed that she had no dress under her fur coat, but only a pair of silk step-ins. Another time she received him clad only in a thin kimono and a pair of brocade shoes. Her jokes were often quite frivolous. But at the same time she never remained alone with him in a room where he would feel safe from any unexpected intrusions. Even then, were it any other woman of equal attraction, he would probably have tried out long ago what his possibilities with her were. But he valued too highly his friendship with Duchess Irina Mihailovna to risk it in this manner. After all, she could understand, herself, that in view of her exalted rank it was for her to take the initiative, even in love affairs. All he himself could safely do was to convince her that were she to show any initiative she would meet with immediate response. This he tried to achieve by his every smile and glance, as well as by occasional remarks, either in conversa-

tion or in his letters, which were a little more tender than strict etiquette permitted. But farther he was afraid to go.

"No, have no fear of my falling in love with Her Imperial Highness," Max said, after a pause. "You know, I always had monastic inclinations."

"Oho!" Irina smiled and shook her finger at him. "I know a few things about you, Max."

"Do you really? But then there is nothing I could ever hide from you, anyway."

"Really, and why couldn't you?"

"I never can lie to those—h-m-m—to—to whom I am much devoted." He blushed. Irina's eyes lighted with a mischievous glitter.

"I am deeply touched," she said. And Max wondered whether she was joking or whether she actually meant it.

"The devil take it!" Prince Constantine suddenly exploded from behind his Almanach. "That wretch of a Leuchtenberg had never had a mother at all!"

Irina and Max both burst into laughter.

"Perhaps he had no father," said Max. "That happens, you know; but even dukes must have mothers."

"That's what I thought," grumbled Constantine. "At least, I remember my own mother distinctly. But I assure you, the Almanach makes it clear that

Leuchtenberg had no mother. His father must have conceived him all by himself."

"Don't frighten me at such a late hour of the night," said Max. "If you will convince me that men are capable of bearing children I won't be able to sleep."

"It is a nuisance," remarked Irina. "I had one, but I never want to have another one. Fate is really so unjust. Why should we women alone suffer in this wise?"

"Ah, but then you don't have to shave every morning," said Max, "and this in the long run is, I'm sure, worse than bearing children."

"Nonsense, I don't mind shaving at all," said Irina.

"My dear niece, my dear niece," exclaimed Prince Constantine. "Are you again getting absent-minded? What are you saying?"

"Why do you always have to think of something wrong?" Irina protested indignantly.

"Fade out, fade out, and never open your mouth again," said Constantine. "Where did you learn such obnoxious Mohammedan practices? Ha-ha-ha."

Irina blushed and tried to look angry, but her face smiled against her wish.

"You shouldn't always try to make a fool of me,"

she said. "I can tell a few funny stories about you, too. How about your antique vase in Athens?"

"What about it?" the Prince blushed. "What has that got to do with the topic of our conversation?"

"What exactly was our topic of conversation? Listen, Max, just to show you that my uncle isn't so clever, either, I'll tell you how he acquired a beautiful antique vase the last time we were in Athens."

"Don't listen to her," Constantine said grimly, returning to his Almanach.

Irina obviously enjoyed his discomfort. "You see," she began, turning to Max, "Uncle Constantine found a beautiful antique vase, but nobody would give him money to buy it, and naturally he had none of his own. He was complaining about it during the whole luncheon, so I told him at last: 'All right, I'll buy the vase for you, but you must take a whole orange into your mouth and eat it.' He grabbed an orange, peeled it off, put it into his mouth, and immediately turned purple. I and one of my cousins saw that he could no longer breathe, so we covered his head with napkins in order that the rest of the diners might not be disturbed seeing him die. And just then a lady began to talk to him, and kept asking: 'Highness, why don't you answer? Highness, why don't you answer?' It was awful. I was already

prepared to announce his death, when something began to shoot under the napkins like a machine gun. I was panic stricken, but then I understood that he had managed to bite through the orange and was spitting the seeds out. Then came a dreadful gulp, and the uncle emerged from under the napkins and yelled: 'Give me my vase!' So we left the table at once, rushed to the store, and found that the vase had been sold an hour before."

"Well, do you consider it a funny story?" asked Constantine, but seeing that Max laughed himself to colics and even lost his monocle he buried his nose again in the Almanach. However, he soon recovered his good spirits and began to tell funny—and, even more so, indecent—anecdotes, for which he was famous on both continents.

When Max finally looked at the clock on the mantelpiece he saw that it was already past midnight. But Irina told him not to worry, for she would give him her car to drive back to the city. They remained talking and laughing until after one o'clock. When Max decided at last to leave, Irina accompanied him to the porch and pressed her hand to his lips, as he thought, in a very affectionate manner. At least, she left it so long in his possession that Max managed to kiss it twice, which was contrary to all etiquette. Prince Constantine helped Max to get into the car

and for a considerable stretch kept running, holding himself to the door of the car and shouting: "Come again soon, come again soon. It is long since I've spent such a pleasant evening. You must cóme again soon!"

Max couldn't help feeling flattered by such manifestation of affection on the part of his late emperor's cousins. He pressed his lips together so as to preserve longer the invisible impression left on them by Irina's hand. He wondered whether she would ever be his. He felt so tender toward her, he would want so much to caress her, to love her. He also was curious to see her undressed. Her figure intrigued him. Max loved round curves and soft shades and had accordingly a special liking for the roundest and softest parts of feminine physique. But Irina's figure seemed a bit too flat, and yet her shoulders possessed some unusual attraction. Perhaps she belonged to some unusual type Max had never yet seen. The artist in him longed for Irina as much as the man. Max was an æsthete. He was also endowed with a very tender heart. In short, he was susceptible.

Of Prince Constantine Max thought but little. On the whole Constantine seemed to be very much of a fool. But Max felt intrigued in regard to Duchess Alexandra Petrovna. He had known her as a child. In fact, for several years she had been the object of his childish adoration. But now he had not seen her

for a good many years. He wondered what she looked like. He pitied her because of her terrible experiences. Irina and Constantine really shouldn't have talked of Alexandra as they did. After all, Alexandra was even closer related to the Emperor than they were. She was an imperial highness. Besides, she had been less than twenty years old when she had escaped from Russia. Could she be blamed for whatever had happened to her? Obviously not. No matter how she came to marry Mr. Rosenkranz or how she happened to have a child, she could be nothing but an unfortunate victim of some monstrous scoundrels. . . .

Jimmy Brooks loved to ride fast. If a chauffeur insisted on keeping inside the legal speed limit Jimmy fired him at once. It was Jimmy's favorite chauffeur who was now taking Max to the city. The roads at two o'clock in the morning being equally free of traffic and of motorcycle policemen, the Brooks car was now going at sixty-five miles an hour. But Max was so completely absorbed in his thoughts that he didn't notice it until the chauffeur asked him grudgingly whether he didn't mind the speed.

"Speed? Do we speed?"

Max looked around. It was a beautiful summer night. The fields and the roofs of the buildings were glittering in the moonlight. Bushes and hedges were

passing them with a swift and abrupt rustle. Yes, they were going pretty fast. Max turned back to see whether some vigilant policeman wasn't following them, after all. He saw nobody; the road was deserted.

"No, I don't mind the speed, I love it," he said to the chauffeur, who immediately began to beam and tell him stories of his many adventures in speeding. Max let him talk and emitted from time to time a short laugh. The chauffeur seemed to be a good fellow, and Max didn't want to offend him. But his own thoughts were drifting farther and farther away.

It occurred to Max how much such friendship with royalty would have meant in olden days. What a career he would be making at the Russian court if he were on such intimate terms with the Emperor's cousins. But now all of it meant nothing at all. He was but a poor artist leading a monotonous, almost dreary existence. Even in love affairs he had to satisfy himself mostly with models and stenographers. There were, of course, aristocratic Russian ladies, many of whom were anxious enough to love and be loved. But refugism had robbed them of their erstwhile charm. Most of them appeared even more vulgar than the poorest of models.

Max thought of old Russia, of spring nights on the Volga, of nightingales, and tender maidens courted

by cavaliers in glittering uniforms. The best of New York theatrical shows could not approach in beauty and poetry what, back in Russia, had been a plain, everyday reality. It had been cruel of fate to show Max a glimpse of that romantic splendor only to take it away from under his nose just when he had begun to be big enough to turn from a mere spectator into one of the actors. If he had to live all his life in his present modest way, why couldn't he at least have been born in humble circumstances? Didn't Dante say that there existed no greater torture than to remember in a miserable present a glorious past?

Yes, now there was nothing left of that glorious past but Duchess Irina with her alluring shoulders, the clownish Constantine, and that phantom, Duchess Alexandra Petrovna. All of it so unreal, as unreal as this beautiful car in which Max was now riding. People whom he passed on the road were perhaps looking with envy at the occupant of such a beautiful machine. But the machine wasn't his, not even Irina's. It belonged to Jimmy Brooks, and who was Jimmy Brooks? He had a real machine, and he had real money, but he wasn't a real person. Duchess Irina and Baron Maximilian were real persons, but they had no real money. It was all so foolish, rather tiresome. . . .

Max yawned. He was glad to notice that they were

now passing the Fifty-ninth Street bridge. It wouldn't take long now to get to his studio apartment on Fifty-third Street. It occurred to him that he had been sleeping for a great many nights in monastic solitude. But it was such a bore to be hunting for satisfactory girls. He had too much work to do. Besides, there was Duchess Irina. . . .

At last the car stopped. Max thanked the chauffeur, gave him a tip, and hurried to his apartment. There were days when Max was afraid of his own thoughts. It was not in his nature to brood over something definitely lost. He found it demoralizing, aside from being quite useless. But the familiar rooms of his apartment, where everything bore the imprint of Max's own personality, helped him to calm down. He hurriedly undressed and washed himself, took an uncut French novel in a yellow paper cover, threw himself on his bed, and began to read.

Only when he felt that his eyes were closing against his will and that there was no danger of his remaining awake did Max turn out the light. Just as he had hoped, he was fast asleep before a single annoying thought could enter his mind.

CHAPTER TWO

MAX HATED WAITING. NOT THAT HE WAS offended by the lack of respect one is shown by being made to wait. He simply was organically unable to endure it. Five minutes after he had been brought to the luxurious drawing room of Miss Emmy Dill Jones, Max was pulling out his watch for the third time, and for the third time saying to himself: "Unbearable!"

In those five minutes he had already studied the whole room and found it extraordinarily tasteless. The windows were draped with dusty velvet curtains. Equally dusty carpets covered the whole floor.

Every inch of the walls was occupied with family portraits that seemed all cut out from magazines. At every step stood either a big stuffed armchair or a sofa. The amount of bric-à-brac, mostly of heavy bronze, piled up on all tables, on the mantelpiece, and on every other available place, made one feel as if one were in an antique shop.

"Ye Olde Shoppe," Max fiercely whispered to himself.

Finally his attention was caught by two enormous bouquets of some peculiar white flowers which stood on both sides of the fireplace. They looked suspiciously unreal. Max took one of the flowers and rubbed it between his fingers.

"Preposterous," he said aloud. "Paper!"

Yes, the flowers were made of paper. Max pulled out his watch:

"Ten minutes! The devil!" Once more he looked around. "An ideal house for a Moscow fish merchant," he decided.

Three minutes later Max began to wonder whether it wouldn't be best for him to go home. It was really ridiculous. He had come to paint the portrait of Her Imperial Highness Duchess Alexandra Petrovna von Lichtenfelsen. Instead he was told by a fat butler in a cutaway coat to wait for Miss Jones. He never wanted to see Miss Jones. Much less did he

want to wait for her. But just as he made a step toward the door, on the threshold appeared a stout old lady with snow-white hair and small brown eyes that moved quickly under swollen eyelids. The old lady produced something she probably thought to be a smile and went with surprising swiftness, her hand outstretched, toward Max.

"Are you the Baron whom Duchess Irina told us about?" she asked in a squeaky voice. "Such a pleasure to meet you."

Max kissed her hand, or, rather, touched it with his lips.

"Won't you please sit down?" said Miss Jones. "Her Imperial Highness will see you in a minute. She hasn't been so well of late, so she isn't yet dressed. In the meantime we can have a little chat."

Now Miss Jones was all smiles, and Max's heart began to melt. On closer examination she looked like a kindly old soul. Besides it was kind of her to be offering her hospitality to Duchess Alexandra.

"You must pardon me," said Miss Jones, "but you Russians have all such difficult names. Your name is Baron——?"

"—Von Waldenscherna."

"Yes, of course, that's right. That's what Duchess Irina wrote me. Very stupid of me to forget. Well, my dear Baron, I understand you are a Russian and

you knew Her Imperial Highness in her childhood?"

"I had indeed the honor."

"Yes, Her Imperial Highness seems to remember you. But I just wanted to warn you. Of course you know about all the terrible experiences Her Highness has had. It is just too awful. I simply cannot imagine how the poor child has survived. And the courage she has is simply amazing. Now I must tell you that there is one point on which Irina and I do not agree. Duchess Irina seems to think that our poor little Alexandra has a bad disposition. This is utterly wrong. She is the most reasonable, the most sensible little lady I've ever met in my life. I know she quarreled with Duchess Irina, and I told Irina right to her face: 'It was all your own fault.' Yes, I told her so. And I'm going to tell everybody who will ever quarrel with Her Imperial Highness that it is his own fault. Her disposition isn't bad, it is angelic! But she's naturally sensitive. Oh, but she reminds me of a high-strung instrument which you can't touch without obtaining an immediate response. Naturally one has to be very tactful with her. After all the poor child has suffered . . . Why, I simply can't imagine how she has kept her reason. I would have gone crazy long ago myself. But I just wanted to warn you that you must treat her very tactfully, avoid all painful subjects, and never, never tell me that you've quar-

reled with her. If you do, I'll tell you right now that it is going to be your own fault."

Max smiled good-naturedly. He began to like the old lady. It was clear that she adored Duchess Alexandra and would not permit anybody to offend her. It was pleasant to realize that the Duchess was so well protected.

"I assure you that I am not going to quarrel with Her Highness," he said with a bow. "We've discussed this very subject with Duchess Irina, and, much as I respect her, I permitted myself to disagree with her, just as you did. I remember Duchess Alexandra as the sweetest child imaginable."

"I am glad to hear this. Yes, it is exactly as you say. She is the sweetest child imaginable. To me, of course, you all still look like children, for I'm seventy-five, you know. And I tell you I have never seen anybody so well bred, so perfectly educated, so sensitive, and so tactful as Her Imperial Highness. And of course I also want you to do your very best so far as her portrait is concerned. Never mind the time or the amount of work. I can pay, and I'm going to pay well, but the portrait must be satisfactory to Her Imperial Highness."

"I'll try my best."

"I'm sure you will. Well, now, I guess we can go upstairs."

Miss Jones brought Max into a small elevator and asked him to operate it himself. Not being an expert in this art, Max swiftly descended to the basement. It was a foolish thing to do, but luckily Miss Jones seemed nothing but amused by his mistake. Finally they reached the proper floor. Miss Jones led Max to one of the doors.

"I'm not going to enter," she said. "The Duchess expects you, you have only to knock."

Max felt how his heart began to beat faster. The door assumed a mysterious appearance. He knocked. A voice, even more musical than that of Duchess Irina, said: "Come in."

Max entered the room and saw at once Her Imperial Highness Duchess Alexandra Petrovna standing straight erect before him, nervously crumpling a handkerchief with her beautiful thin fingers that seemed chiseled out of transparent marble.

She was small and slender, but her wavy dark hair and her velvety brown eyes would make everybody recognize in her a close relative of Duchess Irina. There, however, the resemblance of the two cousins stopped. Duchess Alexandra was much smaller, and if Irina's figure was a bit flat, Alexandra had no figure at all. One could take her for a girl of twelve. But everything in her breathed the nobility and grace of an ancient royal race.

A flood of painfully dear memories overwhelmed Max when he looked at this small, childish, and yet so regal figure. He bowed very low. He felt a lump rising in his throat, but he made an effort to give his face a cheerful expression. Duchess Alexandra smiled at him kindly and stretched out her hand in that inimitable gesture of royalties offering their hands to be kissed. Max took and kissed it. Her fingers seemed so fragile that he was afraid to break them. Then he straightened himself out and looked the Duchess in the eyes. Ah, how wrong Irina had been when she said that it would be difficult to make Alexandra's portrait look pretty. True, Alexandra's face was pale and drawn and showed clearly traces of mental and physical suffering. But what could compare in beauty with these eyes? Sorrowful and yet radiant, suffering but kindly, old in experience but childishly innocent. Eyes of a Madonna. Ah, if he could only faithfully reproduce them on canvas he would create an everlasting masterpiece. Her forehead was also beautiful. Like her hands it seemed to have been chiseled out of marble. The lower part of her face was irregular. There were unmistakable signs of degeneracy in her jaw, but even this possessed a peculiar charm of its own. And the line of her neck was classically noble. Her hair had a natural wave and a glitter which that of Irina did not have.

Perhaps Irina's beauty was more obvious, but in comparison with Alexandra she now seemed to Max almost banal.

For a considerable time Alexandra and Max remained standing, without saying a word, looking each other in the eyes. Alexandra had even forgotten to withdraw her hand, which Max still kept in his. Then she said in a low voice:

"Sit down, please."

He waited for her to sit down first. She must have understood, and seated herself in the corner of a sofa, inviting him with a gesture to sit beside her. He obeyed, but at the same moment a small Pekinese jumped on his lap and began to growl.

"Jimmy, down! Down, Jimmy!" ordered the Duchess, slapping the dog gently. Jimmy made an apologetic face, hopped down to the floor, and curled himself at his mistress's feet.

"He's my best friend," said Alexandra. She laughed. Her laughter took Max's breath away. It was so melodious. It seemed to come deep from the chest. "He's always afraid that somebody might hurt me," she added.

"He must be a good dog, then," said Max, trying hard to conceal his nervousness. "But it isn't possible that Your Imperial Highness should consider a dog as your best friend. There certainly must be

enough human beings devoted to you, body and soul."

"I've never met them," she answered with a pathetic little smile.

"I shall endeavor to show at least one such person to Your Imperial Highness," said Max, astonished at his own boldness.

Alexandra smiled, this time more cheerfully. "Why do you call me Imperial Highness? You know I'm nothing more than a plain Mrs. Rosenkranz."

"Your Imperial Highness is nothing of the kind," Max retorted hotly. He was surprised that he so soon began to feel quite well at ease in the presence of Duchess Alexandra. "The sister of the late Emperor married a plain Colonel Kulikovsky, but she still remains Grand Duchess Olga and Imperial Highness."

"Oh, many people call her just Madame Kulikovsky. Also, she was a grand duchess and the Emperor's sister—that's different."

"And Your Imperial Highness may some day become an empress." These words seemed to have escaped Max's lips without his own knowledge. Alexandra tried to frown, but Max noticed a little smile play around the corners of her mouth.

"You know that is quite impossible," she said. "And anyway, I don't want you to call me Imperial Highness."

"Shall I then call you Imperial Majesty?"

"Oh, no, not yet!" Now she began to laugh openly. "I tell you, you must call me Mrs. Rosenkranz."

"You can banish me to Siberia, but I am not going to call you by any such name."

"Don't you like it?"

"Oh, it may be a good name, but it doesn't belong to you."

"Of course it does. Don't you know that I have married a German, or rather a German Jew?"

"Your Imperial Highness can marry a Chinese Lithuanian, but to me you will always remain an imperial highness, unless some day you will become majesty."

"I see you are terribly stubborn, but so am I. What did you call me when we were children?"

"Officially I called you Alexandra Petrovna, but unofficially I remember calling you even just Alexandra."

"You did? Fancy. Well, I think we'd better make it official for the present." She smiled at him mischievously.

"All right. To this I cannot object. Your Impe——"

"What?" she tried to frown angrily, but her face beamed.

"I beg your pardon, Alexandra Petrovna. But now I have a good idea."

"What kind of an idea?"

"Ah, you ought to have heard the warnings I received about you." Max suddenly began to feel as well at ease as if he were talking to his own sister. Years of separation and suffering seemed to have faded from memory. It was but yesterday that he had played hide-and-seek with his adored little Fairy Princess Alexandra. "Yes," he continued, smiling happily. "Alexandra is so quarrelsome, Alexandra can be frightful, we nicknamed her Ivan the Terrible."

"Ha-ha-ha!" Alexandra threw back her head and began to laugh like a child. "I know who told you all this—Irina!"

"I wouldn't have told you so myself, but now you've guessed it——"

"You know, she's a bit *là-là*. But I like it that she calls me Ivan the Terrible. He and Peter the Great were the best rulers Russia has ever had."

"My Lord, do you mean to say that you are going to imitate them when you become an empress?"

"I certainly will."

"Well, one cannot argue with empresses. But I shall make one request. After the revolution I spent more than two years in Siberia, and I just hate the

place. May I now beg, in commemoration of our childhood's friendship, not to be sent again to Siberia?"

"Have no worry on that account. I could never understand my late uncle when he was spoiling that perfectly good country by sending all undesirables there. No, I'll have everybody shot right in St. Petersburg."

"Amen."

They both began to laugh. In the meantime Jimmy must have decided that Max was really trustworthy, for he jumped again on his lap, but instead of growling began to wiggle with his tail and smile amiably.

"Jimmy, down!" commanded Alexandra.

"Oh, but don't chase him away. You see, we are good friends now. I love dogs so much."

As a matter of fact, Max was indifferent to most dogs and disliked some of them, including the Pekinese. But at that moment he thought that Jimmy was really an admirable dog.

"It is really extraordinary that he made friends with you so soon. It generally takes him weeks to get accustomed to a new person."

"You see, then, that you can trust me. But why is he called Jimmy? Is it in honor of Irina's husband?"

"Most likely. It was Irina who gave him to me, and

he was already called Jimmy. I myself wouldn't have given him such a foolish name. But this reminds me: you were telling me of all the warnings you received on my account and said that you had some brilliant idea."

"Indeed I did. Since I see that you dislike so much to be called Imperial Highness, I'll call you that every time you begin to quarrel with me."

"Really? Well, you shouldn't entertain any illusions. When I quarrel I do quarrel," she laughed.

"Somehow I can't imagine you quarreling."

"Oh, but I do. And you won't have to imagine anything. I am going to quarrel with you just as with anybody else."

"I tremble, but now I have my weapon. You'll be called Imperial Highness for every little grimace you make at me. Incidentally, am I not supposed to be painting your portrait?"

"Oh, yes, you are. But we can start another time. I don't feel like sitting for a portrait to-day."

"As you say, but won't your hostess be disappointed?"

"Oh, she has nothing to say about it. I ordered the portrait, she merely pays for it. Besides, it's getting late, anyway. They'll probably bring us some tea. Can you stay?"

"I would be happy to, if I'm not tiring you."

"Don't worry. I would not have invited you if I really didn't want you to stay. And now do tell me all about your experiences in this country. Do you like it?"

"Oh, so-so. I've read in books about countries worse than this one."

Alexandra began to question him on America. It was a veritable cross-examination. She wanted to know all about the Russians who had found refuge here, how they worked, how much they earned. She was inquiring about them exactly as a sovereign would inquire about his subjects. She was also much interested in the American form of government and how it affected private people. From time to time she made some pointed, often humorous remark. She laughed much about Prohibition, but when Max began to make fun of American democratic institutions she frowned.

"You oughtn't laugh at American institutions," she said. "You are a guest here."

"Ah, but I can't help it if they do have such funny institutions. Besides, they laugh at them themselves. I have the more right to do it because I have never been either a Democrat or a Republican."

"No, no, you oughtn't to do it. I naturally am not a Republican either. But this is not our country. Besides, they have practically never had a king here, so

that their republic is not quite as criminal as the French or the Russian one, where people have murdered their legitimate rulers."

"Perhaps the Americans would have murdered their king also, but he was wise enough never to come here," observed Max.

After the tea Alexandra smiled maliciously and asked: "What would you say if my Imperial Highness should express the strange wish of going to the movies?"

"Oh, but that would be wonderful. Let's go."

"Let's," she said. "I'll only have to wash myself first, and in the meantime please take some of my perfume. I like people to be perfumed."

"But here men never use perfume."

"Then you can't go with me to the movies." She ran to her dressing table, took a big bottle of perfume, and splashed it all over Max. "Now, that's better," she said, wrinkling her nose. "I only wish you had a uniform. I just hate civilian dress. It looks so ugly."

"But now I smell like a bouquet of flowers," said Max.

"That's quite all right." She examined him carefully. "Your monocle is quite becoming. In general you would be presentable enough if only you had a uniform. You see, I like to go out with men who

look decent. I think you may brush your hair a bit. It isn't your fault that it curls, but you must try to get some of these curls down a little. You can use my brushes, while I am washing myself."

Alexandra ran out of the room, and Max sat down at her dressing table and began to brush his hair with her brush. A quiet happiness overcame him. That mysterious duchess who only yesterday had seemed to him a phantom became suddenly so real and so dear. And with her returned to him that beloved past which he had thought vanished forever. It also gave him enormous pleasure that she at once recognized in him her childhood's friend and was now treating him as such. It delighted him to brush his hair with her brush. He remembered again Irina's warning and laughed. What would Irina say if she could see him now, sitting at Alexandra's dressing table and brushing his hair with her brush? Ah, last night he felt proud because two highnesses had treated him like a friend. But here was an imperial highness who was treating him like a brother.

And who could tell but that Alexandra would not become an empress, after all? It struck him as absurd when Irina mentioned such a possibility. But now it didn't seem absurd at all. Alexandra was undoubtedly clever, and in spite of her fragility possessed a strong personality. She was also so charming and

adorable, and Russians were a romantic people. They could be impressed by her much more than by some old grand duke. Her rights of succession were of course very remote. But after all, monarchy in Russia could be restored only by means of a revolution. And in a revolution legal rights counted for little. Important was the fact that she was an imperial highness. Who would be digging out paragraphs to find which one of the many imperial highnesses had a better legal claim to the throne? Of course, she had to be first delivered from that awful name of Mrs. Rosenkranz. Her marriage had to be annulled, and she had to get her money. Aunt Mavrikia had to be given a good smack on the nose. Well, all this could be accomplished. At least he was willing to try.

Max was awakened from his reverie by Alexandra, who approached him from behind and pulled the brush out of his hand.

"What are we dreaming about?" she asked, starting to brush her hair.

"I was thinking that your aunt Mavrikia deserves a little admonition."

"Ah," her eyes lighted threateningly. "So Irina talked to you about that, too?"

"She did."

"But she didn't convince you?"

"I don't know that she tried to convince me of

anything. At any rate, she did convince me of the necessity for you to have a good lawyer and deliver a stiff fight to Aunt Mavrikia."

"Ha-ha-ha! Irina would burst if she could hear that. She, of course, is all on the side of Aunt Mavrikia. I have a lawyer, but I don't know how good he is for delivering a fight. We may discuss the matter some day. I begin to think that you may yet make a good prime minister. But now let's go to the movies."

In the movies Max found it impossible to look at the screen. All that was happening to him was just too incredible. It couldn't be true. Could he ever have dreamed that he would some day be sitting in an American movie with Her Imperial Highness Duchess Alexandra Petrovna von Lichtenfelsen at his side? It was fantastic, impossible. Some twenty-four hours ago he lamented his dreary existence. Now he felt himself the happiest among mortals, the hero of an incredibly thrilling adventure. He kept on looking at Alexandra, as if trying to convince himself that it was really she. She noticed it.

"You must look at the screen. Why do you stare at me like this?"

"But I must study your features to make a good portrait."

She smiled significantly. She knew, just as he did,

that he was thinking least of all about her portrait. "I order you to look at the screen," she whispered again. "It isn't decent to stare at me in this manner."

"I must obey, my empress." He fixed his glance on the screen, but at the same time slipped his hand into hers. She let him hold her hand for a while and then quietly withdrew it. They kept a grave silence through the rest of the performance and on their trip home. Each of them seemed plunged into deep thoughts. At the door of Miss Jones's house Max began to take leave, but Alexandra asked him to come upstairs, and when they reached her room declared that he was going to stay with her for dinner.

"But Miss Jones didn't invite me," he protested feebly.

"What do you care about that when I have invited you?" she asked haughtily. "We'll have dinner here, in my room," she added in her usual friendly tone. "But you must forgive me. I am very tired. I'll go and put on my kimono. In the meantime try to get something nice on the radio. It's over there in the corner. Miss Jones had it installed especially for me. I think it was rather nice of her."

Max began to feel uncomfortable. What would Miss Jones, with all her American ideas of propriety, say if she were to discover that he had spent the whole day with Alexandra, never even started to make her

portrait, and now was to dine with her alone in her room? But his apprehensions were soon dispelled. Just as Alexandra, clad in a beautiful silk kimono, emerged from the bathroom, somebody knocked at the door, and in came Miss Jones. She showed no surprise at Max's presence and confirmed Alexandra's invitation for dinner.

"I'm so glad that you two are getting along so well," she said in her squeaky voice, but now even that squeak seemed pleasant to Max. "My poor little duchess is always so lonesome. You must come often, my dear Baron. Well, I won't disturb you. Just dropped in to see if everything was all right, and to wish you good-night. I'm going out and will be back quite late. Your dinner will be served in a minute."

The old lady bowed and smiled and left the room, carefully closing the door, and Alexandra, forgetting her imperial dignity, began to make the funniest faces at Max, repeating:

"Miss Jones didn't invite me. Miss Jones didn't invite me. Of what are you afraid, anyway?"

It was a cozy dinner. Alexandra was in an excellent mood. She laughed and joked and seemed vastly amused by this somewhat unconventional little party.

"What would people say if they knew that the mysterious Duchess Alexandra, clad in nothing but

a very light kimono, was entertaining in her rooms a young man at dinner?" she repeated several times, casting at Max mischievous glances.

But after the dinner she suddenly grew very tired and lay down on her bed. Again Max wanted to leave, but she told him to stay and manage the radio. She wanted some soft music. Also she was so afraid of staying all by herself with her terrible memories, in the evening. He could make himself comfortable, smoke as much as he wanted, and pay no attention to her. Perhaps she would soon fall asleep, for his presence made her feel safe.

How could Max refuse? He sat down in an armchair, and for a whole hour sat motionless, looking at that beautiful head resting among many pillows. It was a touching sight. It provoked so many memories, so many thoughts. It filled his heart with such tenderness, and also with such sadness and pity. But it also gave him new, unexpected hopes. And it was all so bewildering, so incomprehensible. . . .

At last Max saw that Alexandra was fast asleep. He looked at his watch. It was ten o'clock. He got up and approached the sleeping Duchess. But for the moment he forgot that she was a duchess and an imperial highness. He rather thought that she was his sister, perhaps his daughter, whom he loved more than anything or anybody in this world. He saw in

her but a precious human being whose happiness meant to him more than his own.

He whispered over her the evening prayers which he remembered his mother whispering over him when he was sick and unable to say his prayers himself. Then he crossed her and gently kissed her on the forehead. She smiled faintly in her sleep. Max crossed her again and walked on tiptoes out of her room.

CHAPTER THREE

THE EXPERIENCES OF THAT DAY HAD BEEN SO extraordinary that even the sight of his apartment did not restore Max's sense of reality. He began to pace his studio, dropping his monocle and inserting it back, only to drop it again. His head was so full of thoughts, his heart overflowed with so many emotions, that he was unable either to think or to understand what his emotions were. But he felt clearly that this was no longer the year 1927, and that he was no longer in the city of New York. He was transferred into some different age and to some unknown city. He was transplanted into an entirely new life.

Somebody rang his bell, but Max didn't hear it.

Even after he finally heard it, he went to the door and opened it in a purely mechanical manner wherein his mind had no participation. Then he stepped back and looked before him in bewilderment. He saw a rather good-looking young woman smiling at him inquiringly.

"Are you Baron von Waldenscherna?" She pronounced his name with difficulty. It must have taken her a whole day to learn it.

Ordinarily young women who knocked at the Baron's door could be assured of at least a pleasant smile, but this time the Baron frowned.

"I am," he said curtly.

"I have a letter for you from Mr. Willett. I'm sorry if I am too late, but I've been here twice before and there was nobody here."

"I was out. May I see the letter?"

She fumbled in her bag and produced a crumpled envelope. Max tore it open impatiently. Harry Willett was also a painter and a good friend of his, but now such a sudden reminder of the reality of New York with all its prosaic inhabitants seemed offensive.

DEAR MAX:

I remember that you were looking for a good head for a magazine cover. Here's one. Strikes me as sort of original.

Besides, she seems to have had nothing to eat, but I couldn't possibly use her just now. Her name is Nancy Callaway. She looks like a good girl. I would appreciate it if you'd let her earn a few dollars. I hope that she may be of some use to you.

Yours ever,
HARRY.

Max's first impulse was to tell Miss Callaway that he had no need of a model just now, but his glance fell on the sentence, "Besides, she seems to have had nothing to eat." In the years of refugism Max had learned only too well what it means to have nothing to eat. Poverty never failed to arouse his compassion, especially for women. He looked again at Nancy Callaway. She was dressed neatly, but then of course one could never tell with these crazy American girls: they always managed to look nice even when they had nothing to eat. Besides, the enchantment of a few minutes ago had already been broken. He might as well oblige Harry and interview his protégée. Max smiled pleasantly and invited Miss Callaway into his studio. Her face brightened. She must have already decided that he was not going to talk to her.

"Would you mind taking off your hat?" said Max when they came to the studio. Miss Callaway sat down on the sofa and took off her hat, and Max

lighted a big blue lamp. He looked at her attentively but failed to discover anything original about her. She was attractive, no doubt, but in America for a girl to be attractive didn't mean to be original. Max always tried to be fair. He sneered at American democratic institutions, but he was only too willing to concede that there hardly existed another country which could boast of so many attractive and good-looking women as did the United States. On the whole Miss Callaway had a sort of "baby face," even if of a rather intelligent variety. Her features were not exactly regular, and she had freckles about her nose. What Max liked in her best were her good-natured and slightly humorous hazel eyes and a dimple on her chin. And the only thing at all original about her was the color of her hair. It was red, but with an unusual golden luster which seemed to give it real radiance. Yes, her hair was indeed original and very beautiful. Luckily it wasn't bobbed and had a pretty, natural wave. Max could not remember ever seeing such hair before. Well, this was already something. Miss Callaway also seemed to have a good figure. She was tall, but not too tall, she had everything that the two Duchesses von Lichtenfelsen lacked, but not too much of it. Finally Max had to admit that Miss Callaway had enough sex appeal.

At some other time Max would probably consider

her a find. But just now he was least of all interested in discovering new samples of feminine pulchritude and attractiveness. The series of magazine covers which he had planned for some time and which only yesterday occupied much of his thoughts now seemed very unimportant and useless. True, he still had to make a living, but he could feel no interest in such a prosaic and nonsensical thing as a magazine cover. He also didn't have much money at the moment, for he hadn't yet received several checks for his last work. Yet he had to buy flowers for Alexandra and he had to be able at any time to take her to any show she would choose to see, pay for her taxis, and so on and so forth. In short, Miss Callaway could not have chosen a more inopportune time to apply to him for work. Again he felt the temptation of sending Miss Callaway away, but again he remembered Harry Willett's statement that she seemed to have had nothing to eat. If this were true, poor as he was, he still was rich as compared to Miss Callaway.

Max sighed, dropped his monocle, and looked at Miss Callaway doubtfully. It seemed to him that he could catch a glimpse of disappointment in her eyes. She must have interpreted his silence as a decision on his part not to engage her. If she was as anxious as all that to be engaged for a few sittings she must be actually up against it.

"It is a bit late to do any work to-night," said Max. "But I wish you'd come to-morrow."

She smiled again. "When shall I come?" she asked.

"Well, that's just the question." Max hoped that to-morrow he would perhaps again be retained by Her Imperial Highness till a late hour. At the same time he realized that now that he had given Miss Callaway the assurance that he was going to engage her it would be cruel to keep her in suspense. He had to give her an opportunity to earn a few dollars regardless of whether he actually could use her services.

"The trouble is that I do not know exactly when I'll come in to-morrow," he said after another pause. "H-m-m, let me see. . . . I'll tell you what we could do. If you don't mind taking a chance, come in about eight o'clock and wait for me till about ten. I'll tell the superintendent to let you in. You'll find plenty of books here, if you like to read. If I fail to appear by ten, call me up the next morning. Would that be all right with you?"

"Oh, yes," she said emphatically.

"What's your rate?"

"We are supposed to charge a dollar an hour and sit three hours, but if you wouldn't need me for three hours at a stretch——"

"No, no, that is perfectly all right. It is the usual minimum charge. And since I'm not sure that I'll

be here to-morrow I'd like to pay you for two sittings in advance, if I may."

"That is very kind of you, if you are sure that——"

"Oh, yes, yes, that's perfectly all right." Max reached for his pocketbook and produced six dollars.

Miss Callaway was obviously pleased. She pushed the money rather hastily into her bag, put on her hat, and got to her feet.

"Thank you very much," she said, starting toward the door.

"Not at all, not at all, it is for me to thank you," answered Max, with his customary profound bow.

"The poor girl must be hungry," he said to himself as soon as the door closed on Miss Callaway. "The way she hooked herself to those miserable six dollars . . ."

A wave of sudden generosity rose in his heart. He rushed out of his studio and ran down the stairs. She was already opening the door when he reached her. Max tried to assume a manner of perfect unconcern.

"Oh, here we meet again," he remarked. "Incidentally, are you going straight home?"

Miss Callaway looked at him doubtfully. "Yes," she said.

"I'm just going out for my supper," said Max. "I just thought that perhaps by some chance you

haven't yet had your supper either, in which case I would be happy . . ." Her glance confused him. Decidedly she was suspecting him of some malicious intentions. He wondered what he should say, but suddenly began to laugh. "You look at me rather suspiciously, but really and truly and cross my heart I'm talking without malice. I'll even admit that I ran down in the hope of catching you. You see, I just hate to eat alone."

Miss Callaway smiled. "If that's the case, I accept your invitation, even though you do look sort of malicious."

"Appearances are often misleading, Miss Callaway. I'm afraid that your suspicions will increase further when you see my restaurant. It's a speakeasy, to tell you the truth, but really quite decent and so conveniently located—just a few doors from here."

"Now, what do you know . . ." She laughed and followed Max to his speakeasy.

Max wasn't hungry in the least. He never ate much. He had already eaten too much at Alexandra's, for she had insisted that he should consume a full plate of everything that had been served. But he was afraid to offend Miss Callaway by letting her suspect that his invitation for supper was a gesture of charity. He started by ordering a heavy meal for

her, and after much painful deliberation ordered for himself two soft-boiled eggs, a home-made cake, with rum and black coffee.

"Aren't you going to have anything else?" asked Miss Callaway. How different was her voice from that of Duchess Alexandra. It had its attraction—in fact it was alluring—but it didn't have the same musical quality. It was so much more ordinary.

"I never eat much in the evening. I'm afraid of nightmares."

"Then you must be wishing a nightmare on me! Look at all you've ordered for me!"

"You are young. You must eat more. I'm old."

"You old?" with every piece of food she consumed Miss Callaway became more cheerful. "Just how old are you?"

"Twenty-seven."

"Ha-ha-ha! If that's old——"

"But you surely are much younger."

"Not so much. I'm twenty-two."

"Well, that's quite a difference. When you were a baby of ten I was already quite grown up. Incidentally, would you care for some wine? They serve tolerable Chianti here." He noticed again the doubtful expression in her eyes. "You really mustn't think that you have fallen in the clutches of one of those wicked Europeans one reads so much about in Amer-

ican magazines. I may be wicked enough, but I am, as a rule, frank. I never hide any so-called bad intentions whenever I have any. You can rest assured that you'll get back safely to your house. Shall I order some wine?"

She leaned her head to one side. "I guess I'll take one more chance, but I do begin to think that you are a wicked European. At least, you look like one."

Max chuckled and dropped his monocle.

"What makes a man wear a monocle?" asked Miss Callaway.

"A combination of poor sight with mistaken vanity, I suppose. In my case it might also be inheritance. My father and grandfather both wore monocles."

"You remind me of an Austrian archduke."

"That's flattering, but what do you know about Austrian archdukes?"

"Nothing at all, except that I sort of imagine they must look kind of funny."

"Oh, so you think that I look funny?"

"I didn't mean to say that. You look rather nice. It's the monocle which looks funny."

"That's very kind of you. However, I'm not an Austrian but a Russian."

"So Mr. Willett told me. I've heard somebody say that all Russians are a bit crazy and always commit suicide. Is that true?"

"Quite. I commit suicide regularly twice a week. But you, you are a real American, aren't you?"

"Oh, yes."

"Are you doing anything besides posing?"

"I tried a lot of things—art work, writing, and what not, but somehow I never seem to get anywhere. I don't know what the trouble is, unless that I'm a bit lazy and hate office jobs."

"I'm glad to hear that. What can be more odious than an office job? But have you enough work as a model?"

"No, not much. There are few calls for the head only—at least, for my kind of head."

"This doesn't do much credit to the New York artists. But you'll have more calls from now on." Max wondered what was pulling him by the tongue. He really didn't have the slightest intention to engage Miss Callaway often. It was simply that he couldn't talk to a good-looking woman without trying to say something pleasant to her. But it wasn't nice to give to a poor person vain hopes of earnings she was never going to get. He tried to correct himself. "Unfortunately, I haven't so much money myself. I'm a refugee, you know, and about as good a business man as you are, so I can't afford models as often as I'd like."

"Don't worry about that. I'll give you credit. I'll

be your model on an installment plan. That sounds very businesslike, doesn't it?"

"Never give credit to artists. They're very unreliable people, you know."

"So I imagine; but I rather like you. Besides, you've paid me for two sittings and given me a supper that ought to last me for a week."

"That was purely selfish. I wanted to assure myself of the pleasure of seeing you again, and I wasn't certain that I wouldn't convert the six dollars into gin in the meantime."

"Are you beginning to pay me your wicked European compliments?"

"Oh, no. I'm afraid of compliments. It's a dangerous practice. I knew in Russia a general who specialized on compliments. Whenever he was introduced to a lady he immediately asked: 'You don't live in Petersburg, do you?'—'Oh yes,' the lady would answer, 'of course I live in Petersburg.'—'I can't believe it,' the General would say.—'Why not?' the lady asked, to which the General replied: 'Because I live in Petersburg myself, and it is inconceivable that I wouldn't notice a woman as beautiful as you are, before.' So once he was introduced to a lady and as usual asked: 'You don't live in Petersburg, do you?' And the lady answered: 'I do, but you can't believe it for you live in Petersburg yourself and you

certainly would have noticed so beautiful a woman before.' It happened, you see, that the General had already been once introduced to this lady, but forgot it."

"You are a clown," observed Miss Callaway. "I really begin to think that all Russians are a bit crazy."

What Max thought, but didn't say, was that Miss Callaway was a bit drunk. Her cheeks were very red, her hazel eyes shone brightly, and her lips parted in a happy and most alluring smile. The more Max looked at her the more he agreed with Harry that there was something original about her. She had a baby's face, and what made her face so babyish was the childishly innocent expression of her hazel eyes. And yet with a bunch of green grapes over her ear, which would match admirably with her red hair, she would make a beautiful Bacchante. An innocent Bacchante—that was original. But at the same time Max felt a growing uneasiness. He thought of Alexandra and of the chaste, almost religious admiration with which she inspired him. He wondered what she would say if she knew that he went right from her room to an Italian speakeasy and was now entertaining at supper a red-haired young woman of whom he knew nothing and who seemed not unaccustomed to drinking? Was he not committing a sacrilege?

And yet it was difficult to suppose that there could be anything bad in entertaining a girl with such innocent hazel eyes and such a nice dimple on the chin.

As for Miss Callaway herself, she was obviously quite unaware of the doubts she provoked in the Baron's mind. She chatted cheerfully, telling Max amusing stories about her friends and neighbors in Greenwich Village. She was decidedly witty and possessed of a considerable sense of humor. Some of her stories were rather risqué and told in adequate expressions, but Max could not feel shocked. Apparently Miss Callaway belonged to those rare people who can say anything at all without ever appearing vulgar. Or was it the innocent expression of her eyes which made him feel that way about her?

Be that as it may, Max obviously could do nothing for the moment but wait until Miss Callaway decided to go home. The thought of Alexandra gnawed him a little, and yet he didn't feel exactly miserable. When Miss Callaway finally did get up, Max was astonished to see by his watch that it was almost midnight. This increased his remorse, but for the moment he felt more worried about Miss Callaway, for he could plainly see that she wasn't quite firm on her legs. In the street Miss Callaway smiled at Max tenderly and said:

"Well, now, good-bye. I take the elevated here.

Thanks awfully. I had such a wonderful evening."

"The pleasure was all mine, I assure you," Max answered with a bow. "But are you sure that you won't have any trouble getting home?"

"Oh, you mean to say that I'm drunk? Well, I am, as a matter of fact, but I'll certainly get home all right. But it is very sweet of you to have thought of that. Good-night, darling," and before Max had the time to guess her intention, she had thrown her arm around his neck and kissed him right on the lips. In the next moment she was already running fast toward the elevated, her high heels beating a cheerful staccato on the pavement.

Max dropped his monocle. Now he was definitely perturbed. There was no use denying that he enjoyed immensely that spontaneous kiss. It gave him a real thrill and immediately changed the model, Miss Callaway, into the human being, Nancy. A very nice human being, too. But how about Alexandra? How about that religiously chaste kiss with which he had kissed her forehead? He thought that it was with the impression of that adored forehead on his lips that he was going to go to bed to-night. But now, instead of the dry freshness of Alexandra's forehead he felt on his lips the warm and moist lips of Nancy. Nancy's kiss was neither solemn nor exactly chaste, and yet so pleasant.

Ah, but after all, what was the use thinking about it? Since when had he reverted to the stage of life when every kiss seems to be an epoch-making event? Also, he himself had done nothing wrong. He couldn't know that Nancy was going to kiss him, and when she did kiss him he obviously could do nothing but respond. Most elementary politeness required that. Of course, it was advisable to be more careful with Nancy in the future, but then she was undoubtedly a nice girl. In fact, the way she had kissed him only showed how nice she was, and what she had done after a private supper and being slightly drunk she wouldn't dream of doing in the sober atmosphere of work. No, it was really foolish of him to think of the matter at all.

CHAPTER FOUR

"WHOM DO I SEE? OUR DEAR BARON MAXIMILIAN von Waldenscherna! Why, you seem to have forgotten us completely. But then, of course, we all understand. When one is spending all of one's time with imperial highnesses one doesn't remember ordinary mortals."

Maria Georgievna Nekrassova raised her hand to Max's lips without getting up from the wicker sofa in the middle of her store. Maria Georgievna was one of those Russian ladies who would be very romantic in their Russian boudoirs but appeared prosaic in the poor setting of refugee life. Her husband, a for-

mer naval officer, claimed to be engaged in chemical research, but gossipers had it that he was simply manufacturing synthetic gin. Maria Georgievna herself had a fashion store, not far from Max's apartment. How she managed to keep her store going was a mystery. It was always crowded with refugees but seemed to be never visited by customers. The same gossipers who accused her husband of making gin claimed that Maria Georgievna's store was but a screen, and that in reality she was supported by a wealthy old American. But Max himself didn't believe it.

Maria Georgievna, or as Max called her, Murochka, was quite pretty. At one time he had almost fallen in love with her. They had petted and kissed a great deal, but it never came to real love. Why, Max didn't know himself. It almost happened one day. But at the most romantic moment Murochka moved briskly and displayed a pair of offensive green bloomers which must have been bought at a basement sale. This was just the trouble with Russian ladies. Of course, it wasn't their fault that they were so poor. But on the other hand who could expect an æsthete to love a lady clad in green bloomers? Why not dispense with that piece of apparel altogether, if one couldn't afford really nice panties?

Nevertheless, Max remained on the friendliest

terms with Murochka and used from time to time to stop at her store. But for the last month he hadn't had any free time at all. Every afternoon he had had to call on Duchess Alexandra Petrovna and was seldom permitted to leave before nine. His work on her portrait progressed very slowly because Alexandra could never pose for any length of time and often wouldn't pose at all. But she wanted his opinion on all her affairs, she charged him with conducting all of her business correspondence and negotiating with her lawyer. He had to take her out to shows, accompany her on her rides in Miss Jones's car, and on her shopping tours. He also had to report to her all the day's news, discuss politics with her, do errands for her, even entertain her guests. And whenever she felt particularly nervous and depressed, he had, as on his first visit, to sit at the foot of her bed, tuning the radio on soft music, and watch over her until she was fast asleep.

With all these new duties Max had only the mornings and an hour or two in the evenings left for his work. Luckily for him Miss Callaway proved to be not only a good model but also a real mascot. He had not been able to work with her often, but much to his surprise he had sold every one of her pictures he made—for magazine covers, book jackets, and advertisements. If it weren't for this Max's income

would undoubtedly have suffered, but thanks to Miss Callaway it was increasing. Decidedly she was a nice girl. She also caused him no more worries. Whenever she came to him they had to work so much that there was no time or opportunity for even the mildest flirtation. But she was invariably pleasant and congenial.

With all his time taken by Duchess Alexandra and by his own work Max naturally almost forgot about Murochka's existence. However, she would have had no reason to feel slighted if she had known that Max had almost forgotten about the existence of even such exalted personages as Duchess Irina and Prince Constantine.

Strangely enough, it was Alexandra herself who eventually reminded Max of Murochka. They once passed together Murochka's store, and Alexandra noticed in the window a Russian shawl which she immediately decided to buy. But she would not enter a store filled with Russian refugees and asked Max to buy the shawl for her.

When Max entered Murochka's store, he found it, as usual, full of people. Aside from Murochka there was her saleslady, Aglaida Stepanovna Piskulina, a woman past forty, tall, heavy, and with the jaw of a prize fighter. Max nicknamed her "The Crocodile," but she herself used to say that she felt like a

young butterfly. She even tried to flutter like one, making the tiny store roll like a ship on high seas.

Next to Madame Piskulina sat a black-haired Russian woman with dreamy eyes who was telling Madame Piskulina's fortune with cards.

There was also Ivan Ivanovich Burachkoff, a former naval officer and one of Murochka's steadiest admirers. He claimed that Maria Georgievna meant to him "more than God Almighty" and lamented the fact that he could not become a subway turnstile, in order to embrace daily such parts of her beautiful body which turnstiles are wont to touch.

Finally there were two sombre-looking Russian men who stared at Max inimically.

Max kissed Murochka's hand, greeted the others with a general bow, and sat down at Murochka's side. It amused him sometimes to irritate people, especially Russians. Perhaps he had developed this taste through necessity. Every Russian wants at heart to be a baron and wear a monocle. But one has to be born a baron, and one has to possess a considerable courage and disregard for public opinion, to wear a monocle. Hence a monocled baron is the envy of everybody, and is certain to receive irritated and hostile glances from about nine of every ten Russians he meets. Since Max refused to feel miserable because of the dislike for him of other people

he had no alternative left but to enjoy irritating them. Also, he knew how to do it. He looked at everybody haughtily through his monocle, then let it fall from his eye, caught it with premeditated nonchalance, and turning to Murochka said with a charming smile:

"My dear, you accuse me of forgetting you, an ordinary mortal, for the sake of imperial highnesses. This is preposterous. You are simply fishing for compliments. A goddess like you, calling herself an ordinary mortal!"

Whereupon he again inserted his monocle into his eye and once more looked at everybody in turn. Max knew that he succeeded perfectly in filling every heart in his audience with rage. Each of these people surely felt deeply insulted by the haughty baronial glance falling on them through that unbearable round piece of glass. On top of this, every man in the room must have gone green with jealousy, seeing the obnoxious baron on such intimate terms with the beautiful Maria Georgievna. And the two ladies must have felt no less angry that Max reserved his most charming smile exclusively for Murochka.

Although Murochka was not a baroness and had no monocle, she too liked to irritate people, especially her admirers. She evidently appreciated the opportunity Max was offering her and looked at him

from the corner of her eyes with a significant smile.

"My dear Max, I know that you always have a ready supply of compliments, but they mean nothing to me. I need some action to be convinced."

Max tittered inwardly. He just could hear all the curses which exploded in the hearts of their audience when she called him her dear Max. He decided to add some fuel to the fire.

"Murochka, my angel, you know that all you have to do is to move your little finger. Give your command and I shall obey. What particular action, if it can be mentioned in public, would convince you of my devotion?"

"Aha, that sounds better! Well, of the mentionable ones, an action I would appreciate, would be the purchase by you of even a two-dollar hat. You see I have many admirers," she looked at the three men mockingly. "But financially speaking the only result of their admiration is that they smoke all of my cigarettes."

"Murochka, don't judge us men too hard," answered Max. "Many a time I myself could do nothing for you save smoke your cigarettes. But can you tell me how much that white shawl with Russian embroidery you have in the window costs?"

"Oh, that, my dear, is far too expensive even to prove one's love to me. No, I'm not as exacting as all

that. Just buy a two-dollar hat. That's the cheapest piece of merchandise I have in my store."

"And what if I insist on buying the shawl? To tell you the truth, I looked at the tag. It costs forty-five dollars."

Max took out his wallet, counted slowly the money, and handed it to Maria Georgievna. She looked at him, pleasantly bewildered and somewhat incredulous.

"Do you really mean it?"

"Of course I do."

She took the money. Max bowed down and kissed her wrist.

"Ah, but that's wonderful!" exclaimed Murochka. "Now, Max, I do believe in your devotion. Ho-la! Forty-five dollars!" She looked triumphantly at her other admirers, who seemed ready to tear Max to shreds with their own teeth. Madame Piskulina also appeared annoyed. Why couldn't the Baron have bought the shawl from her? Murochka would get her profit anyway, but she, Madame Piskulina, could at least get a little commission. Also there was no need for the Baron to be so demonstrative in his attentions to Murochka.

"In your place, my dear Murochka," Madame Piskulina said with a sarcastic little chuckle, "I wouldn't feel in the least flattered. The Baron

bought the shawl from you but not for you. Better ask him to whom is he making such lavish presents."

"Ha-ha! What do I care? All I'm interested in is the forty-five dollars, and I appreciate Max's thoughtfulness in spending them in my store. Besides, I know all about Max. He sees nobody save his duchess. That doesn't excite my jealousy in the least, and if she will be the one to wear my shawl it will be good advertising for my store. Now, tell me, Max, is it really for the Duchess?"

"Perhaps it is. But what makes you think that I see nobody save her?"

"Ah, the earth is full of rumors. The whole Russian colony knows that you became a sort of Prime Minister of Her Imperial Highness the Duchess Alexandra von Lichtenfelsen. Tell me all about her. Is she pretty?"

"Rather."

"Moral?"

"I believe so."

"Well, that isn't so good for you, then. But, tell me, what's all this mysterious business? What's that fortune everybody is now talking about, and what is that marriage of hers with a Jew or somebody, and a child or something, and all these stories that she may not even be the real duchess?"

"Oh, it's all mostly foolish talk. Of course she's a

real duchess. She is having some litigation with her aunt, who is trying to rob her of her father's fortune. As for that marriage, it was purely fictitious. It was the only way for her to escape from Russia. But of course they'll always be wagging their tongues in the colony."

"Perhaps they wouldn't be wagging their tongues so much if the Duchess would behave differently," said Burachkoff angrily.

"Really?" Max put the monocle into his eye and looked at Burachkoff enquiringly. "What has the Russian colony against the Duchess's behavior, if I may ask?"

"If she's a real duchess, and all that, why doesn't she invite any Russians? She brings suit against a relation of the Russian imperial family, but we Russians don't even know anything about it. Some mysterious machinations through American lawyers, with American support. Why doesn't she appeal to us Russians if she wants our support?"

"What makes you think that Her Imperial Highness wants your support?" asked Max with a naïve grin.

Burachkoff blushed. He couldn't find an answer at once. "I understood that you were complaining against the attitude of the Russian colony toward the Duchess," he said at last.

"I'm sorry, but you're quite mistaken. I made no such complaint."

"Even then, if she were a real Russian duchess, and all that, she'd be entertaining Russians and not Americans," grumbled Burachkoff. "But then who is she anyway? Duchess von Lichtenfelsen—a good Russian name, that."

"Almost as good as Baron von Waldenscherna," Max said with a chuckle. "We used to have a few queer names like that in Russia."

"I didn't know that you considered yourself a Russian, Baron," said Burachkoff sarcastically.

"But I do not. I have always believed myself to be a Chinese mandarin." Max giggled, dropped his monocle, and turned to Murochka. "Are you still in the habit of drinking chocolate in the afternoons?"

"I am, and you have fully deserved the honor of taking me to the tea room across the street. You wait for me here," she added, turning to Burachkoff and the other men.

The men exchanged furious glances. Madame Piskulina chuckled significantly. The black-haired woman smiled maliciously. But Murochka paid no attention to all this. Her realm was not large, but she was its absolute ruler. In fact, she loved to test her power in this manner. Everybody was angry,

but she knew that none of her admirers would even think of leaving before her return. She leaned on Max's arm and majestically strolled out of her store.

They crossed the street and entered a small Russian tea room. Max's appearance caused some commotion among the waitresses. They hadn't seen him for a long time and had decided that the Baron had "handed the raspberry" to that proud beauty, Madame Nekrassova. But here she was now, bringing the Baron back in triumph, he looking more submissive and adoring than ever. They still remembered his tastes. The Baron had special preference for home-made nut cookies.

"Ah, but this is an unexpected pleasure," said Max, pressing Murochka's fingers. "Do you know, Murochka, that it gives me a real joy to see you?"

"Why, then, do you come so seldom? Now, earnestly, what's all this affair with that duchess of yours?"

"Oh, but there isn't any affair."

"Listen, you can be frank with me. Did she become your mistress, or are you after her millions?"

"How preposterous! It is simply that I knew her when both she and I were children, and now she has asked me to paint her portrait."

"Ah, but I know your way of painting portraits. If you paint her portrait as you did mine . . . But

then I don't know. You seem to be capable of anything except violating a woman properly," she looked at him reproachfully. "But then perhaps the Duchess hasn't found that out yet?"

"Dearest, you know that I'm not an old crab, but really I would appreciate it if you wouldn't talk in this way about the Duchess. It isn't that I personally would ever blame a woman for having love affairs—quite the opposite. But the fact is that I have no love affair with the Duchess, and her mentality is very different, rather quaint, sort of Middle Ages, you know. At any rate, she probably would feel terribly insulted if she heard you talk this way about her."

"Nonsense, she'd feel flattered. I've seen her once, and she isn't in the least pretty. It would be most flattering for her to be considered your mistress."

"I doubt it. After all, she is an imperial highness, and I am just a commoner."

"But she also is a rather homely young female, and you, quite an impressive young male. That counts for much more than social distinctions, and I assure you that in certain respects the Duchess is in no way different from me."

Max could not refrain from laughing. "Devoted as I am to Her Imperial Highness, and little as I know about what you two may have in common, my guess

still is that in those things you are much more attractive, my dear."

"I thought you weren't so much interested in it."

"You are very much mistaken. It really was all your own fault. I asked your permission many times, but you never gave it to me."

"You booby. I tried to explain to you so often that a woman doesn't want to have her permission asked. She wants to be taken by force."

"That's the whole tragedy. I can't enjoy it. I like to play, not to fight. I like to feel certain that I am causing a woman pleasure, not insulting her. Really and truly, I have never loved a woman without her permission."

"Ha-ha-ha! But you are queer! A nice assortment of women you must have loved, then. You remember the difference between a diplomat and a lady? If a diplomat says 'yes,' it means 'may be'; if a diplomat says 'may be,' it means 'no'; but if a diplomat says 'no,' it means that he isn't a diplomat but a silly ass. And if a lady says 'no,' it means 'may be'; and if a lady says 'may be,' it means 'yes'; but if a lady says 'yes' she is no lady but a prostitute. Incidentally, do you also ask prostitutes their permission?"

"Of course I do. They always feel very flattered. After all a prostitute is a woman as any other."

"Ho-ho, would you then say that your duchess is as good as a prostitute?"

"H-m-m, well . . . no . . . well, I don't know. It isn't after all that she's a duchess, but she is a very unfortunate and very lovely human being. But there certainly are duchesses who are worse than prostitutes, and there are also very nice girls among prostitutes."

"And yet you told me yourself that you would never kiss a Jewess. Yet a Jewess is also a woman."

"Oh, that's purely racial. I equally hate to shake hands with a Jew."

"You medieval baron! Really, one can say about you: 'Every baron has his own fancy.' But you haven't convinced me yet that I should yield to your fancy and say 'yes.' It's contrary to all my principles. You know, I too have principles."

"Nor have you convinced me that I should take you by force, even though I begin to feel a strong temptation to do that."

"Perhaps we might yet effect some compromise. I'll have to think it over. But to come back to your duchess, I'm inclined to believe you that she's not your mistress. Then it must be the money."

"Anything but that!" exclaimed Max. "I'll confess that I did get somewhat mixed up in her affairs. I rather deplore it, for I hate nothing so much as

litigation, and then over money. But my sole part in it is to advise her from time to time, because she's such a helpless child and has nobody to help her. Her lawyer strikes me as rather an old hat. Irina Mihailovna doesn't sympathize with the litigation, and the old Miss Jones whom Alexandra lives with is a very nice old pillow, but also has the kind of brains one would expect in a pillow stuffed with feathers. So I felt it my duty to help Alexandra as best I could. I think that I have been reasonably successful, for I can say without boasting that if it weren't for my advice, her aunt Mavrikia would have received her fortune by this time. Now, however, the money is securely tied up. Whether Alexandra is ever going to receive it, and when, I don't know, but I do feel quite certain that her aunt Mavrikia is never going to receive it. But this is all, as far as I personally am concerned. I repeat, I interfered in this matter purely out of my friendly feelings for Alexandra. But I would not have taken a cent of that money of hers, even were it offered to me on a golden platter."

"Then it must be true that, as so many people say, you are fussing with your duchess because you want to put her on the throne and make yourself a dictator."

Max dropped his monocle and began to laugh.

"Do people say that? Wonderful! You know, to you alone I confess that such an idea once entered my head. As a matter of fact, it was planted there by Duchess Irina, who said that Alexandra entertained such ambitions and that this was absurd. But at the same time Duchess Irina didn't seem to think that it would be as absurd to believe that any other of her relatives could win the throne. Folly is often contagious. I merely borrowed Irina's assumption and, arguing from such premises, arrived at the conclusion that Alexandra had as much chance to get on the Russian throne as any of her relatives had, perhaps even more so. I still am of the same opinion. But in essence the whole problem is very much of the same order as the famous question as to how many angels can seat themselves on the point of a needle. The fact is that neither the angels nor the Romanoffs have anything left to sit on."

"Do you mean to tell me that none of your duchesses have any sitting accommodations?"

"Oh, they have, even though rather flat ones. But they have nothing to deposit them on, they have no throne."

Murochka looked at him inquisitively. "Your explanations on this last point seem to me the least convincing. And since there must be some reason for your loitering around that wet noodle of a duch-

ess, I begin to think that you actually are hatching some grandiose political conspiracy. Well, this is rather thrilling, and if you are going to become a dictator I hope that you'll not forget your humble friend."

"I certainly wouldn't. I'd make you a princess and present you with a palace, provided, of course, you'd say 'yes.' However, much as I hate to disappoint you, I must repeat that I'm not hatching any political plots."

"But, my dear, there must be some reason for your spending all of your time on that duchess."

"Why can't you conceive of my doing it purely out of friendship for her?"

"Ha-ha, since when did you become so idealistic? Max, I am quite fond of you, and one of the reasons that I am fond of you is just your practical Germanic brain. You'll never move a finger unless you can get something out of it. I don't mean necessarily money. It may be glory, or power, or simply pleasure. But you are never doing anything just for no reason at all."

"But isn't friendship a good enough reason?"

"Ah, what's friendship, especially between a man and a woman? You know as well as I do that the only sensible form of friendship between people of opposite sexes is the one performed in bed. Besides, I've

heard a lot of Russians say that you are conspiring to put Alexandra on the throne. Frankly I don't envy Alexandra. She'll very soon find herself under the throne with our dear baron on top of it. What intrigues me is, how are you doing it all? Some people say that you are really a patriot and that you want to save Russia. But the majority consider you a very sinister figure. I've heard that you are allied with all Masonic organizations throughout the world, and that you are backed by a secret Jewish super-government. Not that it makes any difference to me. I'd love to see you a dictator, no matter how you get there. My God, I may yet become a Russian Madame de Pompadour. Very thrilling. But you must satisfy my curiosity and tell me who is actually backing you in your political machinations. You know you can trust me with secrets."

"Of course I know it, and I am trusting you with the great secret that all this is pure fiction. God knows I would be quite pleased to become a dictator, but I don't see how I could do it. As for Alexandra Petrovna, although you refuse to believe it, there is really nothing in the whole matter, save that I am very devoted to her and would like to see her succeed in all her troublesome affairs. That's exactly all."

"All right. But you aren't fooling me a bit. I feel slightly hurt that you won't trust me more than

this, but then, of course, conspirators have to be very discreet. Now, however, I must run back to the store. Are you coming with me?"

"I am sorry, child, but I must be running along too."

"But did you take your shawl? Oh, yes, here it is. Well, I regret that you have to go now, but don't forget me. Do come to the store again. You won't have to buy anything any more, and I may yet take up that matter of reaching a compromise with you," Murochka concluded with a laugh.

"You are adorable."

Max followed Murochka to the street and, after tenderly kissing her hand on the back and on the palm, departed, waving to her with his hat.

FUNNY, VERY FUNNY INDEED. COULD THERE be anything more trivial than his conversation with Murochka? While it lasted it seemed to Max that it was a perfectly meaningless chatter. But now that he was back at work, in the studio, this banal, if not nonsensical, talk with Murochka assumed an unexpected significance.

Nothing but friendship for Alexandra. . . . Alexandra had no chance of becoming an empress. . . . Her mentality was sort of Middle Ages. . . . All he wanted was to help a lovely and unfortunate human being. . . .

Wasn't all this true? Yes, it was true, quite true indeed. It was true of what he was thinking of Alexandra now, but it was not true of what he had thought of Alexandra on the day of his first meeting with her in New York. What did this mean? Was he disappointed in Alexandra? Above all, why did his foolish talk with Murochka make him realize that change in his attitude toward the Duchess?

This last question was rather easy to answer. On one point at least his attitude toward Alexandra did not change. As on the day of his first meeting with her, he still felt that Alexandra was living in a world apart. She did not belong to the year 1927, she did not belong to the city of New York. But Murochka, good Russian though she was, belonged to both. The fashion stores kept by ladies of the former Russian nobility became as much New York as was the Sixth Avenue "El," and those ladies themselves were purchasing their lingerie at basement sales. Yes, Murochka belonged to that modern New York wherein Max himself had lived for the last five years but which he had abandoned almost completely since his meeting with Alexandra.

All Max saw of New York now were the few publishing and advertising offices to which he was bringing his drawings, and Miss Nancy Callaway, who posed for those drawings. But neither in the

offices nor with Miss Callaway could he discuss his recent experiences with Duchess Alexandra. Also, the office managers and Nancy Callaway played no real part in his life. He saw them from time to time, exchanged a few hasty words, made and sold drawings, all in a purely mechanical way. His mind and his heart were completely absorbed by Alexandra. But he had nobody to discuss her with, nothing with which to compare her peculiar little world.

Now suddenly one of the windowpanes of Alexandra's enchanted castle broke with a crash, and in the breach appeared the somewhat cynical but very charming and amusing Murochka. Instinctively Max responded to her in her own tone of jovial cynicism. He told her that Alexandra had nothing to sit on, that he wasn't trying to put her on the throne, that he wasn't in the least in love with her, that her mentality was sort of Middle Ages, and that all he wanted was to help a friend in distress. All this said he, Max, who only a month ago wondered whether it wasn't a sacrilege to entertain Miss Nancy Callaway in a speakeasy immediately upon leaving the sacred realm of Alexandra.

It was surprising, disturbing even, especially for the reason that it was absolutely true. Yes, he might as well admit it to himself that his attitude toward

Alexandra had undergone a radical change. But what was that change? Did he no longer love her?

Oh, no, in a way she was dearer to him now than she had ever been. On the day of their first meeting Max thought that Alexandra might some day become the Empress of Russia. He thought that by meeting her he might become a participant of a thrilling and beautiful adventure. He sensed in Alexandra and in her mysterious world a certain grandeur, a sort of awe-inspiring and solemn beauty and significance. Now he knew that all of it was but a phantasm caused by the thrill of meeting again the object of his childish adoration, the relic of his childhood's years. Yes, he still knew that Alexandra was living in a world apart, that she did not belong to this age, but he also knew that there was no grandeur, no brilliancy, and no significance attached to her world, save perhaps the significance of dear memories.

It wasn't just now that Max had arrived at all these conclusions. But it was Murochka, with all she meant and represented, with the glaring contrast of her world to that of Alexandra's, which had made Max fully conscious of them, which had caused him to formulate in so many words what until now he had merely felt.

But what had actually shattered Max's fantastic

dreams about Alexandra and her possibilities?—Alexandra herself! Yes, it was simply by knowing her better that Max understood that she could never become the heroine of any great drama. Not that he was really in the least disappointed in her. He had simply discovered that she was not molded for greatness.

Max was fully aware of all her qualities. Alexandra was intelligent, witty, at times brilliant. She was very much interested in history, art, and music. In matters of religion and morals she seemed very broad-minded and tolerant. She had also considerable executive capacity. Max was often amazed at the ease with which she grasped the main points of her lawyer's complicated reports. Finally, she possessed a considerable sense of humor, and in spite of all her worries could often laugh like a care-free child. But all of these qualities were apparent in Alexandra only when she was in a good mood; and as Max had learned by now, this didn't happen so often.

Max was still unable to understand why Irina had nicknamed Alexandra "Ivan the Terrible." The only trait she seemed to have in common with that redoubtable sovereign was suspiciousness. In fact, this seemed to be her main trouble. But Ivan the Terrible had manifested his suspiciousness in fits of terrifying rage. Max had never seen Alexandra rage, but she

would sulk. Alexandra could sulk for hours. Her beautiful eyes would suddenly lose all expression, as if made of glass. She would stare over one's head into space, motionless, silent, refusing to answer questions or pay any attention to what was going on around her.

She classified all people as either "nice" or "terrible," and it was not easy to qualify in her judgment as "nice." She insisted on judging everybody by the standards of the late Russian Court. Now the rules of good conduct which prevailed at the Russian Court were many and complicated. Their main purpose, however, was to make commoners show sufficient respect to the Emperor and to all personages of royal blood. Unfortunately Alexandra had an astounding memory for all such rules. For instance, one could never be even a few minutes late for an appointment with her. One had to kiss her hand, call her Imperial Highness, in her presence always sit straight erect and without crossing one's legs, and one could never contradict her—at least, not directly. The word "no" she considered grossly insulting. One could never ask her questions. Personal appearance also counted with her a great deal. People who wanted to see her had first to cut their hair, manicure their nails, put on their best clothes, and perfume themselves. It was still better if they dis-

covered first Alexandra's favorite colors and matched their gowns and neck-ties accordingly. The slightest disregard for any of these rules placed the culprit in the category of "terribles."

It was difficult enough to remember and observe these rules, even under compulsion. But Alexandra, with a truly Byzantine maliciousness, deliberately provoked people into disobedience. If she was making an appointment she gave the assurance that she cared nothing about punctuality. If people called her Imperial Highness she begged, nay demanded, that they would call her just Alexandra Petrovna or Mrs. Rosenkranz. She offered to her visitors the softest chairs on which it was next to impossible to sit straight, and she forced them to contradict her by making deliberately absurd statements. If one remained adamant and observant of all her rules, in spite of such provocation, then only would Alexandra consider one as nice. But it sufficed to yield to the temptation of crossing one's legs, or of coming five minutes later than the appointed hour, to be immediately branded as terrible. Alexandra seldom explained to offenders what the trouble was; she simply barred them from her presence without any explanations and, as they thought, without any reason. All of which did not serve to make Alexandra popular.

This was regrettable; the more so because Alexandra needed friends. Max had done all he could to prevent Alexandra's aunt Mavrikia from appropriating Alexandra's fortune. It was now securely tied up by the banks. But this was a negative success. What Alexandra really wanted was to have her marriage to Mr. Rosenkranz annulled, her title officially restored, and her fortune placed at her disposal. None of this could be accomplished without protracted litigation in several countries, which required considerable sums. Alexandra herself did not have a penny. Miss Emmy Jones belonged to those people who cannot make ends meet on an income of $1,000,000 a year. She supported Alexandra luxuriously, but was herself always short of cash. Jimmy Brooks refused his help because Irina was opposed to the litigation. The number of wealthy Russians was very small, and then Alexandra would have nothing to do with them. She called them traitors because they were alive and wealthy, while their emperor had perished in Siberia. All one could do under the circumstances was to find some wealthy American who would be willing to finance Alexandra's litigation. But Americans were just the greatest offenders against Alexandra's rules of good conduct. Few of them knew how to kiss a lady's hand, and as Alexandra put it: "All of them are sitting on their heads."

It was in vain that Max tried to explain to Alexandra that one could not expect Americans to observe the etiquette of the Russian Court, of which they knew nothing. Alexandra's invariable answer was:

"No, no, I don't demand that Americans should observe the court etiquette, but there is no reason why people should sit on their heads. All Americans are sitting on their heads." And if Max persisted in defending Americans Alexandra began to sulk.

It was an exasperating situation. To add to Max's difficulties, he himself had to be constantly on his guard so as not to transgress Alexandra's rules. He received from Alexandra two exemptions only. He actually was no longer supposed to call her Imperial Highness. It even offended her if he did. And he was the only human being who could enter Alexandra's room whenever he pleased and without knocking at the door. Max realized that from Alexandra's point of view the privileges granted him were enormous, indeed unique. But he himself would prefer the privilege of sitting more comfortably, or of contradicting her more freely when this was necessary for her own good. But aside from the two exemptions Alexandra was as exacting toward him as toward complete strangers.

Thus Max's relations with Alexandra were very

different from those he had first imagined. In the ordinary sense they were neither thrilling nor pleasant, indeed they were nerve-racking. But Max's devotion to Alexandra, instead of diminishing, had only grown. Alexandra was no longer for him a romantic figure, a duchess, a future empress. She still remained a cherished survival from the happy days of his childhood and early youth. But, above all, she was a terribly wronged and defenseless human being, ruthlessly persecuted by greedy and overbearing relatives, suffering from the aftermaths of her horrible experiences. She became his protégée, his pupil, his daughter almost. He fought as bravely and persistently against her enemies as against her own unfortunate idiosyncrasies and mental handicaps. With infinite patience he tried to restore her mental equilibrium, to develop in her a better sense of proportion, to help her to find herself in this new and to her incomprehensible world.

This was a painful and ungrateful task. He knew that he could count on no reward, that his service to Alexandra was a purely idealistic sacrifice. But it was just this fact which gave him moral satisfaction. After all, there was something in Murochka's opinion that Max never moved a finger unless he could get something out of it. At least, he could not remember serving anybody so unselfishly as he now

served Alexandra. It seemed to add some new significance to his life.

Max was also pleased with his efficiency in conducting Alexandra's legal affairs. He had done more in one month than her lawyer had previously accomplished in half a year. Aunt Mavrikia must have noticed this, too; at least, her adherents began to be restive. At last Max received a note from Duchess Irina inviting him to discuss Alexandra's affairs with her and Jimmy Brooks. This looked significant. Max felt certain that Alexandra would be pleased to hear of this new development.

On that afternoon Max had an appointment with Alexandra at three o'clock. With his usual punctuality he entered her room at five minutes to three. To his astonishment the room was empty. Max waited, coughed a few times, moved an armchair—there was no response. He looked into Alexandra's closet. All her hats and overcoats were in their places, consequently Alexandra could not have gone out. Where then was she hiding?

Max sighed. He hated to wait, but he particularly hated to wait for Alexandra, for her etiquette forbade him either to sit down or to smoke without her permission. Accordingly he couldn't smoke and had to remain on his feet. Max began to pace the room, then started to examine all the pictures on the walls,

finally went over to the window and began to look into the street. Time crept along slowly and painfully, his feet began to ache, his annoyance grew, and so did his astonishment, but Alexandra did not appear. It was indeed mysterious. At last he pulled out his watch.

"This is really the limit!" he grumbled angrily. "I've now been standing here like an idiot for exactly thirty minutes. Alexandra must again be sulking somewhere, or else testing my good manners. But this is just too much. If she expects good manners from others, she can at least show some manners herself." He walked over to an armchair and sat down. Almost immediately the door to the bathroom flung open, and on the threshold appeared Alexandra. Her eyes were flashing with anger. A deep frown appeared between her eyebrows. Her face was covered with big red spots. Her lower jaw was pushed forward. She held her handkerchief in a clenched fist. She was trembling from head to foot. Max stared at her in bewilderment and almost with fear. He had never seen her in this state before. Indeed, it was hard to believe that this fury could at all be Alexandra. Ivan the Terrible, yes indeed—now she looked like a feminine replica of Ivan the Terrible. Slowly Max got up from his chair and bowed. Alexandra glared at him and then asked in a voice trembling with rage:

"What are you doing here at this late hour?"

This question completely confounded Max. He looked at his watch. It was exactly three-thirty.

"I had an appointment with you at three," he said dryly. "I entered this room at five minutes to three. If you are going to keep your visitors waiting, the hour is naturally going to be late."

"You are not saying the truth!" screamed Alexandra. "It was five minutes past three when I went to the bathroom. You were supposed to be here at three, not at four. Now it is too late. Please go home!"

So his guess was correct. She imagined that he was late. This was really silly, but it was exasperating that she actually could rave in this manner. Max felt a strong temptation to take Alexandra at her word and go home. He could so nicely spend this afternoon working on a painting he was preparing for an exhibition. But he felt certain that Alexandra's order for him to go home was but another trick on her part. She would never forgive him if he actually obeyed her. Besides, it was necessary to discuss with her Irina's invitation.

"I'm going to stay right here," he said with determination. "I had an appointment with you at three. I came in time. I have to discuss an important matter with you, and I intend to keep my appointment. I am very much surprised at your manners."

He had never yet rebuked her like this. She was so startled and enraged that, when she tried to answer, her breath failed her and she was unable to pronounce a single word. But at that moment Max's glance fell on the clock on the mantelpiece. The clock showed five minutes past four. He dropped his monocle and with a sarcastic smile pulled out his watch.

"No, no, no!" screamed Alexandra, stamping with her feet. "I know that this clock is thirty-five minutes ahead of time. But you were late. Now you must go home!" She turned on her heel, ran into the bathroom, and slammed the door.

"I declare," said Max. Again he felt the temptation to go home, but he still felt that this would be too great a punishment for her. But she did deserve some retaliation, and Max, practical as he was, chose one from which he himself could derive real pleasure. He seated himself comfortably in the softest armchair and lighted a cigarette. She would consider it an insult. Fine and good. She needed a lesson. For some time Max sat smoking and thinking. He still couldn't get over his bewilderment. He was alarmed. He had congratulated himself that under his patient guidance Alexandra was getting more and more normal. Of late she hadn't sulked as often as before; she had also seemed a little more tolerant, and had be-

come decidedly kinder toward Max. He thought that his work was bearing fruit. And now this outburst of rage, the like of which he had never yet witnessed. So this was what Irina meant by calling Alexandra "Ivan the Terrible"? Yes, she did look very much like Ivan the Terrible. Max wondered how long this attack was going to last and how it would end. Sulk she could for hours at a stretch, but she always got over it eventually and then tried to make up by showing exaggerated kindness. This was her manner of apologizing. For, as she admitted it herself, she was too proud ever to acknowledge her guilt or apologize directly. But how was she going to act after this outburst of rage?

This time Max didn't have to wait very long. He hadn't finished his cigarette when Alexandra emerged again from the bathroom. He prepared himself for another verbal duel but saw with relief that Alexandra was smiling sweetly. Her deep brown eyes looked timidly apologetic. It was an almost unbelievable transformation. It didn't seem possible that the raging fury of five minutes ago and this lovable, smiling woman were one and the same person. Alexandra approached Max and offered her lips for a kiss.

"Now I see that I couldn't get rid of you, even if

I wanted to," she said, looking at him tenderly. "Are you never going to abandon me?"

Max's heart melted immediately.

"How could I ever abandon my little kitten?" he said, gently stroking her hair.

She pressed herself to him with her whole frail body and put her beautiful arms of transparent marble around his neck.

"You I can trust," she whispered. "With you at my side I can be afraid of nothing. I even begin to think that we two, together, could yet annihilate the Bolsheviks."

Max smiled. "One never can tell. But for the present we ought to perform a little annihilation of Aunt Mavrikia. Incidentally, what I wanted to tell you was that I received a note from Irina. She insists that I should call on her to-morrow afternoon. She and her husband want to discuss your case with me."

"Oh, you must go," Alexandra said nervously. "I tell you, I am quite certain that Irina, while posing as my friend, is in reality plotting against me with Aunt Mavrikia. You must go. You may be able to find out a lot from her."

"I'll do as my little czaritza tells me. Frankly I didn't want to go, because it would make it impossible for me to see you to-morrow. You know, it takes more than an hour to get there, and I doubt that I'll

learn anything useful. I do think it's a good sign. Aunt Mavrikia is apparently getting nervous, but Irina probably wants to find out something from me rather than tell me anything."

"Oh, I know, but this might be important. I shall certainly be lonesome, but this is too serious a matter. One must make a few sacrifices to one's cause. You may be able to find out from the Brookses the exact situation in Aunt Mavrikia's camp. Please go, won't you?"

"Of course I'll go, once you want me to. But now, darling, do tell me honestly, what was all this explosion of yours about?"

Alexandra's smile vanished. She looked at Max fearfully.

"No, no, you are wrong. You were half an hour late," she whispered hurriedly.

Max detected pleading in her voice. She obviously begged him not to return to the subject.

"You must be tired," she resumed, smiling again her most charming smile. "Do sit down, but make yourself really comfortable. Perhaps you want to lie down on the couch? You may, I really mean it."

Now she was all tenderness and solicitousness. She stroked his arm, looked him beseechingly in the eyes, pushed him gently toward the sofa, made him sit down, and curled herself at his side.

"I love this tie of yours," she said. "You also have my favorite shirt on to-day. On you, even civilian dress looks very nice."

Max smiled tenderly. The poor child was so anxious to make up for the rude reception she had accorded him. She was indeed. She chatted incessantly for a whole hour, telling Max all the funny stories she could think of. She made Max laugh himself to tears and lose his monocle a dozen times. It was one of the happiest afternoons Max had ever spent with Alexandra. After the dinner she went to bed but asked Max to stay a little longer. When he finally kissed her good-night her face acquired suddenly a mischievous expression.

"I'll confess something to you," she whispered with a suppressed giggle. "You were quite right. I did forget that the clock was fast."

Max was touched. It was the first time that he had heard Alexandra acknowledge directly that she was wrong. On the other hand, he felt annoyed that Alexandra had treated him so rudely and had caused him so much anguish for the trivial reason that the clock was fast.

"Don't you feel sorry, dear, to have caused me so much misery for nothing?" he asked.

"Oh, but I do."

Now she was actually apologizing. It made him al-

most happy. Wasn't this another result of his struggle against her unpleasant idiosyncrasies?

"My little kitten doesn't really have to apologize to me," said Max. "But why didn't you ask me first what time I had by my watch? Even if you thought your clock to be correct, it could have happened that my watch was slow."

"Oh, but don't you see, I remembered that the clock was wrong ten minutes after you came in. It made me so mad to have accused you wrongly that I just didn't know what to do."

Max dropped his monocle. "You mean to say that when you came out of the bathroom and began to shout at me, you knew already that you were wrong?"

"Of course I did. That's what made me so mad."

"Dearest, but why did you have to be so rude?"

"Well, I had to say something, I had to explain in some way why I had kept you waiting for so long, didn't I?"

They both began to laugh.

"You certainly chose a funny way for your explanation," said Max. But Alexandra was now giggling like a naughty child.

"You were even worse yourself," she said. "Here I was, tortured by most awful remorses, dying a million deaths from shame, my last hope being that my

anger would stupefy you into believing that you were actually late, and you, calmly pulling out your watch! Of course I should have remembered that a German baron like you would always have his watch set right. You're impossible! I could have killed you! Besides, I wish you not to forget another time that you are not permitted to contradict a duchess. Oh, but you are a horrid pedant. Couldn't you have said: 'I'm sorry, but I have been run over by an automobile and it took me half an hour to fix two broken legs'? No, no, you're impossible!" She giggled and put Max's hand under her cheek. "And then, of course, blaming poor me. Poor little Alexandra. Everybody always blames her for everything," she concluded with a charming little grimace.

CHAPTER SIX

ON THE FOLLOWING AFTERNOON MAX ARrived at the boat house on the Brookses' estate. Jimmy Brooks ran out to meet him. Jimmy was a chubby little fellow with broad hips, short legs, yellow hair parted in the middle and polished like a shoe, and a round face with a perennial, somewhat foolish smile. He was twenty-six but looked much younger. Apparently, he knew it and was ashamed of it. At least, he tried to add to his age by carrying always in the corner of his mouth an enormous pipe. He wore a khaki coat with a girdle, white trousers with black stripes, green socks, and white shoes with brown leather bands.

Max always cited Jimmy as a proof of his pet theory that mankind should be divided not according to nationalities but according to social classes. Indeed, Jimmy Brooks, while a hundred per cent. American, looked exactly like a son of a wealthy Moscow merchant. Sons of Moscow millionaires always polished their heads, always grinned foolishly, always tried in vain to look important, and were the only people in Russia capable of dressing themselves as ridiculously as did Jimmy Brooks. And also, like Jimmy Brooks, they never knew that they were funny. On the whole, however, Max considered Jimmy to be a nice chap.

"Hello, Baron!" exclaimed Jimmy with a giggle, furiously shaking Max's hand. "So nice of you to have come. Come right in, please, come right in. My wife wanted to discuss a certain matter with you and asked me to be present. What shall we drink?"

"Anything you say, Brooks. Makes no difference to me as long as it is alcoholic."

"Fine! How about some whisky and soda, then—all right? Grand! Hey, John!" he shouted into space. "Whisky and soda for two! Come right in, my dear Baron. Here she is."

Max entered the sitting room of the boat house. Duchess Irina greeted him with a kind smile and gave him her hand to kiss. But Max noticed at once

that the Duchess was highly agitated. She invited Max to sit down and began to talk about the weather. Jimmy fidgeted between them, pouring the whisky and soda and refilling his pipe. Nobody knew how to approach the real subject. Max decided to take the initiative.

"You wanted to discuss with me the affairs of Alexandra Petrovna?" he asked Irina.

"Yes." Irina looked hesitatingly at her husband. Jimmy rushed to her aid.

"Yes, my dear Baron," he said, seating himself on the table and balancing nervously his short legs in the air. "You know, my wife and myself have always been much interested in the fate of Alexandra. We deeply sympathize with the poor girl and wish her success. But we both feel that of late she isn't steering on the right course. Perhaps it's just that we don't know the real situation. We understand, however, that you are now more or less in charge of her affairs. So we thought you could perhaps tell us what it is all about. It isn't just plain curiosity, you understand. We'd like to be of as much assistance to Alexandra as we possibly can."

"I'm sure of that," said Max. "But first I must correct a wrong impression. I'm not in charge of the Duchess's affairs. My rôle, if any, is only that of a personal acquaintance. Naturally, the Duchess asks

my advice from time to time. But that's just as far as it goes. The man in charge of her affairs is her lawyer, you know."

"Oh, yes, we know that," said Jimmy Brooks, pulling at his pipe. "But she's always had this lawyer—at least, for quite some time. But he has never done before what he's doing now. Somebody's egging him on."

Max dropped his monocle and began to laugh.

"And you suspect that I am the malicious person who is egging her lawyer on? Well, this may be true, to some extent. Indeed, I found that her lawyer wasn't sufficiently energetic and didn't take full advantage of the legal possibilities."

"It isn't that, but you've definitely tied up Alexandra's money, and now Aunt Mavrikia can't get it!" exclaimed Irina.

Max looked at her and gasped. It was no longer Irina, but Ivan the Terrible. The very same Ivan the Terrible who only yesterday had jumped at him out of Alexandra's bathroom. Irina's dark eyes were flashing with anger, her face was covered with big red spots, her lower jaw was pushed forward. Ivan the Terrible! It was frightful, and yet it was also funny. Max chuckled.

"I don't know whether I did tie up the money

definitely," he said. "But it is true that I've tried my best to do it."

"But that's terrible! Terrible!" screamed Irina. "That's an outrage! I received a cable two days ago from Aunt Mavrikia. She's furious. The banks won't give her a cent. She wants to know what all of this means? She accuses me of having caused all this by introducing you to Alexandra!"

"I can't understand it," said Max. "You know as well as I do that Duchess Mavrikia Alexandrovna has a purely technical claim to Alexandra Petrovna's money. I question whether she has any claim at all. You can't consider that fictitious marriage of Alexandra Petrovna to that damnable Rosenkranz as a regular mésalliance. At best, the aunt and the niece could reach some kind of compromise. It would be manifestly unfair for Marikia Alexandrovna to grab all the money and leave Alexandra Petrovna penniless. Even then, this is only half of the whole affair. Another issue, quite as important, is that of Alexandra Petrovna's title. You don't want her to remain forever a Mrs. Rosenkranz? Yet her aunt can inherit her money only by having the courts acknowledge the validity of that Rosenkranz quasi-marriage. Finally, the payment of the money to Duchess Mavrikia was stopped in a purely legal manner by a court order."

"What do I care about your court orders?" thundered Irina. "You know as well as I do that all our relatives—in fact, the whole imperial family—have decided that Aunt Mavrikia should get the money. What right have you, a commoner, to interfere with the decisions of the imperial family?"

Until now, in deference to Alexandra, Max didn't want to admit that it was really he, and not Alexandra or her lawyer, who was the leader in the battle against Aunt Mavrikia. But the words "What right have you, a commoner" made him put the monocle into his eye and look at Irina haughtily. Max was ever ready to respect members of royalty. He could even call himself a commoner, as he did in his conversation with Murochka. But no member of royalty could call him that. In his conception an emperor was after all nothing more than a sort of presiding baron.

"When I see highway robbery committed in broad daylight I don't stop to look whether the bandits belong to the imperial family. I call the police," he said with an offensive calm.

Irina glared at him, startled by such impertinence.

"I know what you are trying to do!" she shouted, her eyes filling with tears. "You are trying to put Alexandra on the throne! You don't dare to deny this!"

"Indeed, I do deny it. To begin with, the Russian throne is not, unfortunately, in my pocket. I wish it were there, but in such case I would rather keep it to myself. I can assure you that under no circumstances would I place on it any of Your Highness's relatives."

But Irina was too excited to notice this new insult.

"Don't deny it! Don't deny it!" she screamed hysterically. "I know all about your conspiracy! It's a disgrace! You know how mad Alexandra is at all of us that we didn't back her in her fight with Aunt Mavrikia. Why, she told me herself that she's going to hang every one of us on lamp posts. But you are trying to put her on the throne in spite of that!"

Now Max couldn't refrain from laughing.

"I am of your opinion that were Alexandra Petrovna to become Empress of Russia it would not be so good for her relatives," he said. "However, all they would have to do then would be to stay abroad, even as they are doing it now."

"You can't get out of this with jokes!" exploded Irina. "There's nothing to laugh about. Yes, we could stay abroad. But does the fate of the Russian people mean anything to you? You know that we are the legitimate rulers of Russia! You know that the well-being of the Russian people demands that we should rule them! And you know that Alexandra is crazy,

totally crazy! We nicknamed her Ivan the Terrible, but she'll be worse than Ivan the Terrible. But much do you care about the fate of Russia as long as you yourself are going to gain power! Neither would I like to be in Alexandra's place. She doesn't know the noose she's putting around her neck. You'll make Alexandra murder all of us, and then you'll murder her!"

"My dear, my dear," said Jimmy beseechingly. Apparently he was afraid that the Baron would feel insulted. But Max threw himself back in his chair and began to laugh.

"Really, Your Highness," he said, "I can't believe that you are saying all this seriously. Of course, I feel very flattered that you consider me capable of conquering the whole of Russia, but it is a perfectly fantastic idea."

"There's nothing fantastic about it, and you know it just as well as I do!" shouted Irina. "You know that the whole of Russia wants monarchy back. You know that the Bolsheviks are on their last legs. If Alexandra gets hold of a fortune of twenty million dollars there will be nothing easier for her than to become the Empress of Russia. You know that. It's just what you are counting on!"

"I am afraid that the Bolsheviks have extraordinarily durable legs," chuckled Max. "At least, I have

understood them to be on their last legs for the last ten years, and they still hold out."

"You think that you can get out of this with just a few wisecracks? But you are very much mistaken! You don't seem to realize what you have really undertaken. You propose to fight single-handed the whole of the imperial family. Well, you can't do that! Frankly, you bewilder me. To fight the imperial family! You know what wonderful people all of them are. You know that they are all real saints. You know that they live only for their people. Their only concern is the good of Russia. But you want to fight them. You want to destroy all their work. I can only marvel at such monstrosity. But you overestimate your forces. The imperial family are powerful. They have the backing of all the reigning houses of Europe. They have the backing of the whole British Empire. And Aunt Mavrikia does not want all the money for herself alone. She thinks first of the Russian people. She's going to distribute the money among all of her relatives. They're going to use it for the restoration of the Russian Empire. King George himself is backing them. Do you propose to fight him, too?"

"This is, of course, a point," intervened Jimmy Brooks in a conciliatory tone. "It's a fact, Baron, that the Romanoffs are not only nice but also power-

ful. I think my wife is right. You can't fight them alone."

"But, Brooks, I want to assure you that I never expected to fight the Romanoffs or anybody else as far as their attempts to win the throne are concerned. In fact, I never expected to fight the Romanoffs on any issue. All I was trying to do was to prevent Duchess Alexandra from being robbed by Duchess Mavrikia. Now, if it transpires that the whole imperial family is backing Duchess Mavrikia, I'm sorry, but it isn't my fault."

"Of course it isn't," agreed Jimmy Brooks. "But that's just what my wife is telling you. You didn't know the situation, but now that you do know it you must admit that you can't possibly fight alone all of the Romanoffs."

"Why not? The fight is purely a legal one, to be settled by the British courts. It makes no difference whatever whether it concerns the Romanoffs, or the Hohenzollerns, or Mr. Pumkins from Kalamazoo."

"But it does," retorted Jimmy. "You don't know those royalties, then. Let me tell you that they're the damnedest bunch of crooks I've ever seen. And it's rumored that King George is very anxious to have Duchess Mavrikia get that money because he's sick and tired of feeding all those Russian bums. I know something about it, believe me."

But no sooner had Jimmy pronounced these fatal words than he looked around in bewilderment, slipped down from the table, and hurriedly left the room. Probably he didn't know himself how he had permitted his tongue to slip in this awful manner. The whisky must have caused him to forget momentarily his wife's presence. Be that as it may, Jimmy left in time. Max had never seen such lightnings of rage as those which flared up in the eyes of Duchess Irina Mihailovna. He thought that he could hear the explosions of thunderbolts that flew out of those dark brown eyes. She was too angry even to talk, and for a considerable time remained silent, breathing heavily. But she was a woman, after all. Her eyes suddenly filled with tears.

"It's terrible, terrible!" she panted. "You don't know what mischief you've done. You must undo it —you must." And, covering her face with her handkerchief, Irina rushed out of the room.

Max remained alone. He wondered what he was supposed to do now, but in the following moment Jimmy Brooks reappeared. Jimmy emitted a plaintive sigh, shook his head, and said:

"Let's have a drink, Max."

"Let's, Jimmy."

"Damn it," said Jimmy after emptying his glass in one gulp and passing his tongue over his lips. He

made with his throat a crackling sound, like a piece of wet wood thrown on a fire. "See what you've done, Max," he said reproachfully. "Can't we get out of this in some way?"

"But really, Jimmy, I don't see what exactly I have done," said Max, with a laugh, going over to the sofa and stretching out his legs. "You don't really think that I'm juggling with imperial thrones?"

"Oh, I don't mean that crazy stuff," giggled Jimmy, "but the fact is that this is all a hell of a business. Believe me, I don't give a damn who's going to get that money. But it's a stinking business, I'm telling you. Also, I want some peace. Now you are getting nothing but fun out of it. You'll visit Alexandra, you'll visit us, you laugh yourself sick, and you go home to bed. But I can't do that. I have to stay right here with this crazy woman——" His tongue must have slipped again. He blushed and giggled apologetically.

"I'm really sorry for you, Jimmy, but what can I do? It may console you a bit to know that I haven't such a wonderful time of it, either. You know, Alexandra and Irina are supposed to be cousins, but to me they look more like twins."

"Ha-ha-ha, so you're catching hell from Alexandra? I imagine you would, too."

"I certainly am. I'm catching hell from everywhere."

"Same here. I can't understand how I ever got into such a mess. I never wanted to do anything but to help everybody. God knows, all of it costs me a pretty penny, too. But all I'm getting out of it is kicks every way I turn."

"Let me shake your noble hand, Jimmy."

"Ha-ha! Here goes. But see here, can't we do something to stop this damn show? After all, what do you care? Let that old Aunt Mavrikia get the money and choke herself with it. What do you care?"

"Well, I do care. You must agree with me, Jimmy, that this Aunt Mavrikia is a damn crook."

"Of course she is. But what's this to you or to me as long as we can have some peace around this place?"

"Would you talk that way if Alexandra were your sister?"

"I suppose not. The truth of the matter is that it is, of course, a pretty rotten business. And don't you think that I care nothing for Alexandra. As long as my wife isn't here I may as well tell you that I think Alexandra is a peach of a girl. It would be too bad, of course, to leave her penniless."

"That's my point, too. I don't even say that Alexandra must necessarily have all of the money. After all, she can't eat more than four meals a day. She

doesn't need all the twenty millions. I think ten would do just as well. Let Mavrikia compromise."

"Ah, now you're talking business."

"I've been talking the same business for a whole month now. In fact, it was my opinion from the very first that this is a clear case for a compromise. Neither that crazy Aunt Mavrikia nor Alexandra will ever get a cent without a million litigations. Also, while I like to boast at times, it's ridiculous to imagine that I alone could actually tie up Alexandra's money. I simply helped the bank to put up a good pretext for keeping the money longer. Naturally, no bank is anxious to part with twenty millions. Think of it, they must be getting a minimum yearly income of more than a million from it. Every day that they keep it means something. So my rôle in the whole matter wasn't so important after all."

"There is something in that, too. But what's wrong about the compromise?" asked Jimmy.

"Search me. Stupidity, I presume, or greed. At any rate so far neither Aunt Mavrikia nor Alexandra wants to listen to any suggestions of a compromise. They're all as stubborn as donkeys."

"A nice kettle of fish, I calls it," remarked Jimmy.

"We certainly are in a pretty pickle," agreed Max. "But how about that Prince Constantine? Couldn't he be of any use?"

"Oh, that silly ass? All he can do is to tell dirty stories. No, you can't even mention the subject to him. He grabs his head and yells: 'Leave me out of this.' No, he isn't going to do a damn thing."

"Looks as if we are in it for good," said Max.

"It does look that way. Gosh, I wish they'd all shoot each other or something."

"Wouldn't be so bad, either. But in the meantime I'm sorry that there seems to be nothing I can do to alleviate your suffering, nor is there anything you can do to help me, for that matter."

"So it seems. Well, what can't be done, can't be done. Let's have another drink."

An hour later Jimmy and Max, both somewhat heightened in their spirits by the whisky consumed, parted with a friendy handshake. Jimmy's car took Max to the station. The sky had grown purple when Max finally returned to the city.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WHEN MAX RETURNED FROM THE BROOKSES' to the city, he felt too tired and enervated to dine in a restaurant. At times the human crowd could become insupportable. Solitude wasn't so pleasant, either, but it was preferable to the noise and din of a restaurant, especially after some nerve-racking experience. The calm which Max preserved throughout his conversation with Duchess Irina and Jimmy Brooks was only an outward one. Everything in him boiled with indignation. He was also very depressed. Duchess Irina unwittingly gave him a new picture of the imperial family which made

Max shiver. Could those people he had respected so highly all his life be as dishonest as Irina depicted them? Could they? Did Irina leave him any room for doubt?

Nevertheless, Max was hungry. He stopped at a delicatessen store, and decided to recompense himself for all his worries by purchasing his favorite delicacies. He bought caviar, cheese, *pâté de foie gras,* a pumpernickel, and fresh strawberries. This would make quite a nice supper, he decided. Combined with a French novel, it would help to turn his thoughts into pleasanter channels.

Max reached his apartment, opened the door, and remained standing on the threshold. He saw with bewilderment a figure crouched in the dark on the sofa. He blinked with his eyes. He wasn't really drunk, but, after all, one never could tell what American whisky would do to a man. No, decidedly somebody was sitting on the sofa. Was it a bandit? Max touched his hip pocket, where he carried an automatic pistol. But no, why should a bandit be sitting like that on a sofa? Besides, it suddenly reached his consciousness that the figure was a feminine one. Max turned on the light and saw Miss Nancy Callaway.

She jumped up from the sofa, blinded by the light and smiling apologetically.

"Did we have an appointment for to-day?" Max asked doubtfully.

"No," she answered. "But I had to see you. The janitor let me in. I hope you don't mind?"

"No, indeed, it is a most pleasant surprise." This time Max really meant what he said. Miss Callaway must have been sent to him by fate. It was just what he needed, a pleasant person, unconnected with any duchesses, to help him get over his gloom. He wondered, however, why Miss Callaway had to see him. "I'm just bringing a sort of improvised supper," he resumed. "May I hope that you will share it with me?"

Miss Callaway seemed to hesitate. "I don't know whether I should. . . . I just wanted to see you for a few minutes."

"It is just as you say. I personally would be very glad if you could stay, provided, of course, you have nothing better to do. It isn't much of a supper I've got here, but I think I have still a few bottles of rather good sherry."

"Oh, I'd be glad to stay if you really don't mind it. I haven't anything to do for the evening, but I thought that I might be disturbing you."

"Then it's all settled," said Max cheerfully. "Is it anything urgent you want to talk to me about, or

shall I first put the coffee pot on the fire? Then we'll be all settled and can talk in peace."

"Ha-ha-ha! I never thought that you knew anything about housekeeping," said Miss Callaway. "But let me be of some use to you. You better go and make yourself ready for supper. I'll attend to the coffee."

"That's still better. To tell you the truth, I have come all the way from Long Island and would be happy to take a shower, if you'll permit. It won't take long."

"Take all the showers you want, and leave the rest to me," answered Miss Callaway.

When Max, refreshed by the shower, returned to the studio, he found the table all set, the coffee boiling, and Miss Callaway examining her work with the air of an artist looking at his latest creation.

"My Lord, this looks quite domestic," exclaimed Max. "I never knew that one could set a table so nicely."

"And I have never seen such an assortment of delicacies," answered Miss Callaway. "Aren't you a glutton to buy all this just for yourself? Now I'm glad that I came. You would get sick if you ate all this alone. In fact, we both may yet get sick—and all my favorite things, too!"

"That's perfect. It means that we have the same tastes. How about a cocktail?"

"Of course, let's have a cocktail. Why, I've invited myself to a real party. I think I'll have to try it again sometime."

"I wish you would. I feel rather lonesome in the evenings. Now, if you wouldn't mind squeezing a few oranges while I crack the ice?"

"This is really delightful, perfectly delightful!" exclaimed Max after the second cocktail, indulging his favorite *pâté de foie gras*. "But what was it you had to tell me, Miss Callaway? I hope nothing unpleasant has happened to you?"

"Unfortunately, it is something quite unpleasant. I am really ashamed to talk to you about it, but——" She was visibly embarrassed, and Max decided to help her.

"You need money?"

"I do, but I would never dare to ask you to help me were it not that our landlord threatens to put us out. This has happened to me before, but you see, I live with a girl, and she got sick——"

"Miss Callaway, you really don't have to explain anything. The only question is, how much do you need?"

"Well, that's just it. I need so much that I'd never dare to ask you for the whole amount. You know, I couldn't pay you back in any other way but by posing. So I wanted to ask you whethtr you could ad-

vance me some money on my work and let you decide on the amount, provided you can do it at all. I know that you haven't got much yourself."

"If you would tell me how much rent you owe I would have something to go by. I can't promise that I can pay it all, but I'd be happy to help you some. What is the total of your debt?"

"Oh, it's really a lot—sixty dollars."

"Sixty dollars?" Max sighed with relief. He feared that she would say a few hundred. He hastily pulled the check book out of his pocket. Ah, he could well afford to give Miss Callaway sixty dollars. His bank account was quite satisfactory and there were two more checks coming, and he was working on an advertisement which was already as good as sold. Perhaps he could make it even more than sixty dollars? He frowned and rubbed his forehead. Of course he could. Miss Callaway certainly needed some money for her current expenses also. As a rule, Max helped his friends in any possible manner, except by giving them money, but this time he felt a rising tide of generosity. She was such a nice person, this Miss Callaway. . . . He inserted the monocle into his eye, swiftly wrote a check for $150, and gave it to Miss Callaway.

"So, that's settled, and now we can proceed with

our luxurious repast," he said cheerfully. He felt as if, instead of having given his money away, he had received himself a beautiful present. Miss Callaway's eyes became round.

"Oh," she said. "Can you really afford it?"

"Of course I can afford it, and I owe it all to you. I've sold every drawing for which you've posed, so you see it's really nothing but your rightful share. I'm ashamed of myself that I didn't think of it before."

"But it would take me ten years to pay this back," she protested feebly.

"No, no," said Max. "You don't have to pay it back. I'm telling you it's your legal share of my profits. I really think I should pay you a percentage on everything I get for the pictures for which you pose."

Miss Callaway smiled at him gratefully.

"I really don't know whether I should take it—you are so kind——"

"Nonsense, dear, I'm not at all kind. This money is rightfully yours. We've earned it together, haven't we?"

"I think you are sweet," he said.

"And I think you are a dear," he responded. He took her hand, kissed it, and stroked it gently sev-

eral times. "You are a dear, really. It's funny, we are complete strangers, and yet there are times when I feel as if I have known you for a very long time."

Miss Callaway smiled happily. "I never knew that you were thinking of me at all," she said. "I thought that you paid no more attention to me than to your easel."

"Oh, dear, how could you have thought anything like that? As a matter of fact, it is even difficult for me to call you Miss Callaway. It sounds so formal."

"I often wondered myself why you are always so formal. I wish you'd call me Nancy."

"Thank you, dearest, I shall. But then you must call me Max."

She nodded her head approvingly.

"You thought that I was paying no attention to you?" resumed Max. "In reality I don't know what I would have done without you. You can't imagine what a stifling atmosphere I live in. Take the experience I had to-day, for instance." And Max told Nancy in detail about his visit to the Brookses. "Can you imagine living in a world like that?" he concluded. "It really is enough to make one crazy. All those pathological phantasmagorias about empires, all that hypocritical nonsense. Now, tell me frankly, is it sufficient, in your opinion, to be a duchess and have twenty millions, to conquer an empire? What

would you have done if you were a duchess and had twenty millions?"

"I'd make whoopee," said Nancy.

"You are wisdom incarnate. However, I strongly suspect that all those confounded highnesses would do exactly the same. The difference between them and you is that you say honestly what you would do, while they shed crocodile tears over the fate of their beloved people and pretend that they are trying to save Russia. They're plain rotters, that's what they are, and morons on top of that."

"That's how they strike me, from what I've heard you tell about them," agreed Nancy. "But why couldn't you get rid of them?"

"Ach, my dear, I wish I could. The only question is, what would become of Alexandra? She's such a helpless child."

"Oh, I see," Nancy said pensively.

"Yes, Alexandra. . . ." Max was now talking with the freedom and sincerity which alcohol alone can call forth. "Alexandra is still dear to me. But it's all so different, so very different from what I imagined it would be. So contrary to what I've believed in all my life. Imagine, a family that has ruled Russia for three hundred years. Ah, you wouldn't perhaps understand me quite. . . . Do I not remember all the endless discussions which I heard in my childhood?

What is a president of a republic? Just a politician, temporarily in power. What can be his ambitions? Only to get as much as he can out of it for himself. He regards his office as merely an opportunity to enrich himself by taking bribes right and left. And what can a president, who has started his career perhaps as a shoemaker or a funeral director, know about government? What can be more complicated than the administration of a great country? How, then, is it possible to entrust with it some amateur elected by the rabble? But look at monarchy. An emperor, born to rule, inseparable from his country, interested in nothing but the welfare of his subjects, prepared from his earliest childhood for the difficult task of heading the administration, surrounded by equally competent grand dukes and ministers. . . . Yes, indeed, and here we see this noble family fighting over a few pennies, like petty Jewish vendors, talking such infernal nonsense that any newsboy on the street corner seems a Socrates by comparison. Ah, my dear Nancy, to you all this probably sounds ridiculous, and I'm sure it is ridiculous. But I can't get over it so easily. . . . And to sit day and night in that lunatic asylum, in that repository of Byzantine mummies! . . . Really, if it weren't for you, the one normal and lovable person I see, I probably would have lost my mind long ago."

"My poor Max," Nancy said tenderly. "But I never suspected that you had so many worries. You never told me a word about it before."

"I know I didn't. But that's again another of those monarchial obsessions. Everything must be secret. Nothing ought to be revealed to outsiders. It is high treason to make known the fact that Her Imperial Highness had her nails polished last Wednesday. Nothing but the official bulletins of the Marshal of the Court. . . . It has always been that way. They've enveloped themselves into such Chinese mysteries that before the revolution you couldn't invent anything too fantastic and ridiculous about the Court which wouldn't be readily believed by everybody. And you know, the natural assumption is that if people are hiding something, they must be doing something wrong. Thus all this imperial secrecy led every Russian to believe that the Court was a sort of inferno where all kinds of diabolical plots were being hatched day and night. No sooner did the revolution begin than the whole country rushed to the Palace to find out what was actually going on there. And what did they find?—Nothing! You ought to have seen the idiotic bewilderment of the revolutionaries. They've promised the people to 'reveal everything.' But there wasn't a damn thing to reveal. The greatest state secret was that the Emperor

had his whiskers trimmed every morning, and that the Empress suffered occasionally from indigestion. Why, it was a veritable comedy. But did that teach any of those highnesses a lesson? Go and wait for fair weather . . . they're still at it. Irina, Alexandra, Mavrikia, and the whole lot of them do nothing but repeat: 'Please keep it a secret, please keep it a secret.' Why, Mr. Coolidge is a veritable publicity hound by comparison. And I, having been brought up in that atmosphere, did the easier fall in line. 'Please keep it a secret.' Well, I did keep secret everything concerning Alexandra. You can bear me witness. You are the only person I've seen in this last month, and I've never told you a word about Alexandra's affairs. What is the result? That at first people doubted whether Alexandra had a good claim to her money, and now they doubt whether she is at all Alexandra. They claim with perfect logic that if everything were clean and aboveboard there wouldn't be any of that secrecy in regard to everything concerning Alexandra. Quite logical, too, except that you can't apply to royalties the same standards that you do to normal human beings. They're imbeciles, lunatics, the devil knows what they are. . . . Oh, hell! Let's not talk about it any more. I must have bored you to death with all this fool stuff. I mentioned it only to explain to you how much your

friendship means to me. Besides, one has to unload one's soul once in a while, and then of course I'm a bit drunk. You must pardon me, dear."

"Pardon you? You're a clown, old dear. You must always tell me all your troubles. It makes me happy to think that I can be of some use to you. You know, I really like you, Max, you are so nice. I really mean it."

"Thank you, darling. You are very touching. But I don't know whether I am in the least nice. All this time I have such a messy feeling. What exasperates me further is that I have never acted in so unselfish a manner as I am doing in this case. And never did I have so much trouble. But then it isn't the amount of trouble I really mind, it is the atmosphere of this whole affair. All those nasty accusations, all those insane suspicions, all that dirt. . . . Yes, Jimmy Brooks is right. It's just as he says—a stinking business. . . . Oh, if it weren't for Alexandra——"

Max sighed and began again to stroke Nancy's hand. "You must come to me oftener," he resumed. "You can't imagine what a relief it is for me to talk to you. I really don't know what it is. It sounds banal to say that you have such lovely eyes, and yet it is a fact, and I always examine people's eyes, because I believe that eyes are the windows of the soul, as some poet said. You must have a very pure soul, dear, a

very pretty soul. That's just the difference. Your eyes are lucid, transparent, one can look right into them, and they are so kind and beautiful. There was a time when I thought that Duchess Irina had pretty eyes. Well, physically speaking they are pretty. But you can see nothing in them—dark, muddy, meaningless eyes. They all have that kind of eyes, those confounded highnesses. They must have the same kind of souls—dark, meaningless and muddy. As the Russian peasants used to say: 'not a soul, but mere vapor.' A pretty ill-smelling vapor, I should add. Ugh, I'm sick of all that. If only it weren't for Alexandra——"

Every once in a while Max declared that he had talked enough about his troubles and that he shouldn't spoil the whole evening by talking about royalties. But he kept on talking about them. He had kept his worries to himself for too long. Having started to unburden his mind he could no longer stop, and by the end of the evening Nancy knew every detail of Alexandra's case and all the affairs of the Russian royalty. Everything, in fact, except Max's attitude toward Alexandra personally. Of this he had said nothing, save to repeat again and again: "If only it weren't for Alexandra——"

When Nancy finally decided to go home, Max began to apologize:

"I'm really a silly ass to have spoiled the whole evening with those foolish stories," he said. "You must forgive me, dear. It's only because there is nobody else I could talk with about it, and with you I feel that I can talk freely. But it must have been an awful bore for you."

"But not at all. Why, Max, to me it was all highly amusing. I can understand that you are fed up on royalties, but I have never seen any, and know nothing about them. Aside from this, it gives me so much pleasure to know that you trust me so."

"Oh, of course I trust you. I trust your eyes. Were I actually the Dictator of Russia I would trust you, without fear, with the greatest secrets of state." He laughed and began to kiss tenderly Nancy's fingers. "I am very grateful to you, Nance, and I wish you would permit me to consider you my friend."

Nancy did not answer. She only looked at him kindly and yet a bit sadly. Then she put her arm around his neck and kissed him on the lips. But it was a kiss different from the one she had given him on the night of their first meeting. Perhaps it was even more tender, but it was a sober kiss of friendship which didn't disturb Max in the least. No, it was a soothing and chaste caress which filled his heart with quiet happiness. He took Nancy's head in both his hands and looked her lovingly in the eyes.

"You are very good, Nance," he said gently. "I don't think that you realize yourself how good you are. There is some purity about you—something very wonderful—I can't explain what it is," and he pressed his cheek against her soft and radiant hair and gently stroked her shoulder. Then he kissed again her hand and led her down to the street. They parted with a friendly "Good-night, dear." Max saw that Nancy looked back several times before she finally disappeared around the corner.

CHAPTER EIGHT

IN THE MORNING FOLLOWING HIS IMPROMPTU dinner party with Nancy Max was awakened by an icy cold which made him shiver from head to feet.

"The devil!" he exclaimed through chattering teeth. "That's America. One goes to bed in the tropics and awakens in the arctic."

He sat up on his bed, but his head was turning round, there was a disgusting metallic taste in his mouth, and a dull pain in his forehead. He sank back in despair. He hated nothing so much as a hangover, or, as the Russians and Germans call it, "cats' laments." Max wrapped himself in his blankets and

remained in bed for another two hours. But he could no longer sleep, and when he eventually got up he was still suffering from "cats' laments." He took a bath, rubbed his head with all sorts of lotions, forced himself with a heroic effort to swallow a small glass of rum, and gulped down two aspirin tablets. This helped him some. He went for breakfast to his usual restaurant. A double order of orange juice, two soft-boiled eggs, hot coffee, and additional aspirin produced a further improvement in his physical condition. But he could not rid himself of the mental part of "cats' laments." With Max it always took a form of a profound conviction that life wasn't worth living, that the universe was a perfectly useless and absurd creation, and that he himself was a total failure and a disgrace to his illustrious ancestors. Nevertheless, he forced himself to visit the office of an advertising concern to which he occasionally sold his work. Much to his surprise he received an order for a painting. It was gratifying, but his gloom still wouldn't abandon him. He lunched at Childs, and at five minutes to three entered the room of Duchess Alexandra.

The Duchess was in bed. She met Max with one of her most charming smiles and invited him to sit down on the edge of her bed. He obeyed. Alexandra threw her arms around his neck, pulled down his

head, and pressed her lips to his. He tried to feel happy, but the world still seemed useless. Alexandra had a peculiar tongue. It was so rough. It reminded Max of a strip of moist flannel used in Russian post offices for pasting postal stamps. He felt it his duty, however, to prolong the kiss until Alexandra was out of breath and, releasing him, sank with a happy smile back on her pillows.

"You are terrible," she whispered playing with his fingers. Max looked with his usual pride at his hands. They were smaller than even the marble hands of Duchess Alexandra. His headache was slowly coming back. He wondered whether he had any aspirin with him.

"I felt so lonesome without you yesterday," said Alexandra. "Tell me, now, what happened?"

"Oh, it was the most annoying and silly conversation I've ever had in my life. Irina is absolutely crazy. She staged a veritable scene, had a fit of hysterics, accused me of trying to put you on the throne, and what not. Just crazy," and Max gave a detailed account of his conference with Mr. and Mrs. Brooks.

Every once in a while Alexandra's eyes lighted with anger.

"Ah, but I'll show them!" she exclaimed when Max had finished. "Yes, Irina is right. I'm going to hang every one of them on lamp posts. Not even

that. I'm going to pave the road from Petersburg to Moscow with their skulls!"

Max laughed. "My little Ivan the Terrible," he said. "Look at this formidable fist." He pressed her bent fingers together into a fist and kissed them. "I told Irina that the best thing for her and her relatives to do, in case you were to become an empress, was to keep out of Russia."

"Wouldn't avail them any," retorted Alexandra. "I'm going to lure them back, or have them kidnaped. Oh, I'll get every one of them back, believe me, and you are going to be the one to help me with it. Ah, but we must hurry with this thing!"

"Well, you know, I'm driving your old hat of a lawyer as hard and fast as he can be driven."

"Oh, I didn't mean the litigation. I meant Russia. We must work more on that from now on. We'll devise a definite plan. We'll work out all details, so that the moment I get my money we can start action immediately. Where do you think could we hire soldiers? I don't want those Russian White Guards. They're all traitors, anyway. I think I'll hire an army in Germany. The Germans are good fighters, and they are loyal. What do you think?"

Max suppressed a sigh. There was very little he thought at the moment except that his headache was coming back. He felt a strong temptation to suggest

that it would be still better to hire an army in China, but he realized that Alexandra would not appreciate the suggestion.

"Yes, the Germans are good fighters," he said.

"They are. Look how they fought in the last war. Alone, practically, against the whole world. And now the Allies won't permit them to have a big army, so they must have a lot of soldiers and officers who are out of employ."

"I'm sure they have."

"That's settled, then," said Alexandra, with a little sigh of satisfaction. "But it will be much more difficult with the formation of a government. I really wonder, at times, where we are going to get reliable ministers."

"Yes, that's quite a problem."

"Can you think of any candidates?"

"H-m-m, let me see. Why, I'm afraid I know of many more people who shouldn't be made ministers than those who should."

Alexandra smiled. "I know how hard it is to find the right people, but we must make it. We must have a government."

"Suppose I think it over and make out a list of possible candidates?" suggested Max.

"Yes, that's the way to do it. You are practical."

"The Nordic in me, I suppose."

"Well, I do think that your Nordic ancestry has something to do with your good qualities. A pure Slav is never worth anything."

"Or not much. But now my little kitten oughtn't to worry herself sick over ministers. We'll have some time yet before our triumphant entry into St. Petersburg. How do you feel—why are you in bed?"

"Oh, I feel about as usual. It was only such a strain for me yesterday to be lying here all by myself while you were fighting there with that impossible Irina. Consequently, I feel rather weak to-day. Ah, this Irina! I am bewildered that such a young being, on top of this a woman, can be so wicked. It is lucky, however, that she's also stupid. Ha-ha-ha, she thought that she'd only have to make eyes at you to have the money released to that disgusting Aunt Mavrikia. No, I'd rather starve in a gutter than give a cent to Aunt Mavrikia."

"And yet, you know, the whole case could end much sooner if you and Aunt Mavrikia would decide to compromise."

Alexandra's eyes became big with anger and suspicion.

"Are you going to talk to me again about a compromise? I'll have to believe then that Irina influenced you in some way, after all."

"Ach, dear, why should you always be getting

suspicious? You know yourself that I've advised a compromise from the first day that you asked my opinion on the matter. Now, really and truly, what difference would it make to you whether you'd have twenty millions or ten millions? Besides, isn't the main thing for you to have that quasi-marriage annulled and your title restored?"

"I marvel that you can speak in this manner," retorted Alexandra. "What difference between ten millions and twenty millions? You, so practical, so clever, asking such a foolish question! Obviously, ten millions are only a half of twenty millions. Consequently it would mean cutting all expenses by half. Yet even twenty millions isn't so much for hiring an army, buying munitions, supporting an administration. Also, do you want Aunt Mavrikia to set up a rival organization?"

"Never you fear Aunt Mavrikia. She'll blow in her ten millions at the nearest speakeasy."

Alexandra chuckled, but immediately forced herself to frown.

"At times you are so very wise and so very serious, but then you become flippant," she said. "It's really surprising. How can I help getting suspicious when you suddenly pretend not to understand the difference between ten millions and twenty millions?"

"Now, really, my little kitten, you know very

well what I meant. I think it would be much better if you would receive your title and ten millions in a few weeks than if you have to fight in courts for another ten years, with the possibility of receiving twenty millions in some remote future."

"Oh, then you conduct my affairs in such a manner that I have the possibility of winning my case only in a remote future? That's still better. And of course, you are so practical, so clever, so economical, but you cannot tell two pennies from one penny, or two dollars from one dollar. You just wonder what difference there is between twenty millions and ten millions."

A few red spots appeared on Alexandra's face. Her long fingers were nervously plucking at her handkerchief. She cast at Max a sidelong glance, full of suspicion. Max sighed. Now his headache wasn't coming back, it was back already. It grew worse by the minute.

"My little kitten oughtn't to play so much with words," he said, trying to smile very charmingly. "You know that I understand perfectly the difference between ten millions and twenty millions."

"Oho! But then perhaps you hoped that I didn't understand that difference? Perhaps Aunt Mavrikia has even promised you a million if you'll get for her ten? Perhaps the beautiful Irina has promised to re-

ceive you alone in her bedroom? Irina wouldn't stop before that, I'm sure."

"But I wouldn't be interested in that any more than in Aunt Mavrikia's million. I'm not a Jewish pawnbroker, you know."

"I know nothing!" exclaimed Alexandra. "All I know is that you, who are trembling over every penny" (Max couldn't remember having ever trembled over pennies), "ask me the very naïve question, what difference is there between twenty millions and ten millions? You didn't ask me that before your visit to Irina. But I think I'll write Irina and tell her that she and Aunt Mavrikia could get you for a much smaller price. You'd sell anybody for a thousand! Also, you'd do anything at all for an hour with a pretty young woman! You began to pet and kiss me in a most revolting fashion on the very first day that we met. If you didn't do anything worse to me, it's simply because I have no figure. Yes, yes, don't deny it! You may have forgotten it, but I remember very clearly how I asked you what kind of figure you love. You said that you loved round curves. I, of course, am absolutely flat, like a child! Irina has rounder curves! You're disgusting!"

Her voice was mounting higher and higher. The last words she pronounced in a shriek. Max moved uncomfortably on the edge of her bed. Such out-

bursts of vulgarity shocked him even more than Alexandra's anger. He had always believed that only women of the middle classes could be vulgar. Duchesses were never vulgar. His first experiences with Alexandra served to strengthen his belief. Most American ladies were kissing like movie actresses. It was unnatural, obviously forced, vulgar. Many of them smacked offensively with their lips. Some crowned his exasperation by loud means and the subtle request: "Kiss me another."

Alexandra never did anything like that. Her kisses were thrilling enough, but they never reminded one of the movies. Her every pose, her every movement was an artistic triumph. Everything in her was so natural. Never, never would she say: "Kiss me another." True that she was not of the type which attracted Max physically. But the æsthete in him was thrilled by her every gesture. And indeed, as far as her gestures were concerned, she remained truly Olympian. Unfortunately it was different with her tongue. Right now, for instance, that discussion about curves! Not that one couldn't discuss curves with a woman. Why, Nancy could discuss a lot more than curves. But, ordinary model though she was, nothing that she said ever sounded vulgar, while Alexandra . . . Max sighed deeply and remained

silent. Alexandra waited, probably expecting him to say something, then exploded anew.

"You don't even dare to answer! There's nothing you could answer! Not that one could ever guess in you a baron and a gentleman. Your coronet and your gentility, you have lost them both long ago in these American slums! Even then you know that you've behaved toward me like a cad. From the first day that we met you began to make love to me in a most impudent manner. I was shocked, disgusted, but I didn't know what to do. I was so lonely, so helpless. You seemed on the whole sincerely devoted. Each of your kisses nauseated me. But one has to pay a man for his services. I had no money. I clenched my teeth and decided to bear, as best I could, your brutal kissing. I marveled at your bestiality. But I knew that I had to pay for your services. You certainly took full advantage of my tolerance. But after kissing me all over, you calmly declare that you like round curves. You could have seen from the very first that my figure is flat. I have no figure. Now along comes Irina, wriggles before your nose, and you rush over into her camp. And you have the impudence to come back to me, kissing me in a most disgusting fashion, and telling right to my face that you see no difference between ten millions and twenty millions! All right,

you don't have to see it. You also don't have to sit on my bed. What pleasure can you derive from sitting on the bed of a woman who hasn't even any figure? No, no, don't you dare kiss me——"

She didn't finish because Max closed her mouth with his lips. He could no longer tolerate the desecration of his idol. He could not permit an imperial highness to talk like a whole union of laundry women. It turned everything in him inside out. It took his breath away. Were Alexandra a duke instead of a duchess, he'd stop her, or rather him, with a well-aimed blow of his cane on the head. It was a perfect method of stopping any speech, even that of an imperial highness. Whereupon they would fight a duel and the duke would take good care not to offend the sensibilities of Baron von Waldenscherna. All of which would be a perfect solution if Alexandra were a duke. Unfortunately she was a duchess. Max couldn't hit her. It would be no less insulting to walk out on her. He knew that he couldn't stop her with words. There remained nothing for him but to stop her with a kiss. This was what he did. Alexandra grasped his head and began to kiss him furiously. He was long out of breath, and his lips began to ache. But she kept on kissing. Then she suddenly pushed him away with all her might.

"You're terrible! You're disgusting!" she

screamed. "You're not going to deceive me with your bestial kissing! Don't sit on my bed!"

Max sighed. Now he was really annoyed. He wanted to go home, but he knew that Alexandra would consider this a mortal insult. He didn't want to insult her. He pitied her too much. He got up from her bed, sat down in an armchair, and began to rub his monocle with his handkerchief. He no longer paid any attention to the manner in which he was sitting. As a matter of fact, he let himself sink deeply into the soft cushions of the armchair and crossed comfortably his long legs. His pose was not American, but it was perhaps even more offensive, it was baronial.

Alexandra wrapped herself in her blankets and turned with her face to the wall.

"You may smoke," she said in a furious voice, after a prolonged silence. "It will probably give you more joy than kissing a woman who has no figure. Also, if you take first one cigarette and then another, you may learn the difference between one and two, between ten millions and twenty millions."

She said all this without emerging from under her blankets, and immediately after made it appear as if she were asleep. Max sighed, placed his monocle back in his eye, and with slow gestures took and lighted a cigarette. Alexandra was right. At the moment he

enjoyed much more his smoking than her kissing. In fact, smoking helped him to calm down. He no longer felt disgusted. He felt just bored. The poor woman simply wasn't quite right in her head. One couldn't blame her after all the terrible experiences she'd had. But then Irina had never had any such experiences but was just as crazy. Alexandra and Irina resembled each other as much as do two drops of water. They began to merge in Max's mind into one person. It was a pretty person, but a rather vulgar one. Above all, it was a very boresome person. But that person was also a highness and a duchess. One had to be loyal. It was easy to be loyal to a pleasant person. There was no merit in that. Suppose Alexandra were actually an empress. She would be worse still, but everybody would have to be loyal to her. That would be even more humiliating. Besides, she couldn't be held responsible for her inheritance and upbringing. Also, all her talk meant nothing. In reality she trusted Max blindly. He felt sure of that. Was he to betray her trust by abandoning her? No, this would be quite impossible. Max yawned.

"I didn't forbid you to turn on the radio," came a stifled voice from under the blankets. "I don't want you to bore yourself to death. There seems to be nothing I could offer you that you would enjoy. Why not have some music?"

"I thought that Your Imperial Highness was asleep."

"How considerate of you. But you never tried to ascertain the fact that my imperial highness was actually asleep, did you?"

"How could I? I don't want to insult you any more by touching you, but the way you've wrapped yourself in I can't see even your nose."

"But you must argue. I wonder where did you get this revolutionary spirit from? It seems to give you particular pleasure to contradict me. Shall I beg you on my knees to turn on the radio?"

"No need of that, Your Imperial Highness. It would make your knees dirty. Miss Jones is, of course, very hospitable, but her house appears to me a veritable repository of century-old dust."

Max saw that Alexandra's shoulders began to shake under her blankets. She was either weeping or laughing. It made little difference. Max yawned again and turned on the radio.

"I hope you feel happier now," Alexandra said wrathfully. But Max heard distinctly the undertones of laughter in her voice.

"As happy as I'm going to feel at my own funeral," he said.

The blankets flew back, and Max saw Alexandra shaking with laughter.

"You're utterly impossible!" she exclaimed. "Now, do close your eyes for a second. I want to get up. I think I feel better now. I shall dress."

Max closed his eyes. He heard Alexandra jump up from her bed and run to the bathroom. He dashed to the pitcher of water and swallowed two more aspirins.

"Ah, now it's going to be better," he said to himself, rubbing his temples. "My, if I could only go now and paint."

He went over to the corner of the room and threw back the cloth which covered his unfinished portrait of Alexandra. What a pity that she would sit so little. This last week she hadn't sat even once. And yet the portrait promised to be a good one. It had already the ingredients of all of Alexandra's best qualities. It was lucky, Max thought, that he had started this work while he still knew nothing about the less pleasant of Alexandra's characteristics. In this portrait she was the pure Madonna he had thought her to be at first. In fact, it softened his heart toward her, only to look at this painting. She had such heavenly eyes, such a tender smile, such graceful movements of the neck.

Max became completely absorbed by the contemplation of his work. Suddenly he felt two hands take him gently by the shoulders. He turned his head.

Alexandra smiled at him with her beautiful, radiant eyes. Of what had he been thinking? Why, in reality she was so much more enchanting than his feeble reproduction of her.

"I like it," said Alexandra pointing with her finger at the canvas. "Don't you?"

"I do. I was just thinking what a pity it is that you sit so little for it. I could have already finished it by this time."

"And what pretext would we then have for spending all days together, alone?" she smiled tenderly. "Ah, no, my dear, in your place I wouldn't hurry with this painting. I shall permit you to finish it only when I no longer want you to visit me."

"Do you still want it for the present?"

She didn't answer, but pressed herself to him with the grace of a young kitten.

For the rest of the afternoon Alexandra remained as adorable as she alone could be. They dined together in the happiest of moods. After the dinner Alexandra turned on the radio, put out all the lights, and invited Max to seat himself at her side on the sofa. It was very pleasant to sit like that in the twilight of early fall, listening to music, his little kitten curled at his side and resting her head on his shoulder.

"It is so cozy here," Max said with a sigh of satisfaction.

She looked him in the eyes with a strange smile.

"Don't you want to make this coziness last forever?" she asked.

Max looked at her in bewilderment. Was she proposing marriage to him? Obviously so. Her question permitted no other interpretation. It took his breath away. He could not at the moment analyze his feelings. His mind understood that he was being offered a great honor; he also felt touched; but above all he was perturbed, almost frightened. He took Alexandra's fingers and pressed them.

"Dearest, we couldn't do it right now," he said haltingly.

"Why not?"

"But legally you are still married."

"Does that really matter?"

Max began to laugh. "You are adorable when you say such things. Unfortunately, it does matter quite a lot. You could be put in jail for bigamy."

"Oh, that would be annoying, but would anybody really dare to do that?"

"I'm afraid so."

"That is a nuisance. But we could announce our engagement."

"It wouldn't be so good for your case. I am not of royal blood. It would be again a mésalliance, and

Aunt Mavrikia would then be sure to pocket all of your money."

"What a bore. Can't you think of some way out of it?"

"The only way I can think of is to win first your case."

"Well, let's win it quick, then."

"I'm doing my best, but you know all the difficulties to be overcome. If you hadn't refused to receive Mr. Marshal a second time I'm sure he would have financed you so that you could bring immediate action in court. I think there was also a pretty good chance with that Ladies' Committee Mrs. Rippencloth offered to organize. She personally wanted to contribute $10,000 toward your legal expenses. But you didn't like her."

"But she's terrible. She once came to me with her dog. She held the dog under her right arm and gave me her left hand. It was the first time in my life that anything like that happened to me."

"Well, you see, and Mr. Marshal you didn't like because, as you said, he was sitting on his head. It's all very unfortunate. But I venture to predict that we shan't find an American who would be satisfactory to you if judged by such standards. Yet several of them were at first quite anxious to help you."

"Well, why don't they?"

"But, my dear, because you've thrown every one of them down your stairs."

"What of it? If they really wanted to help me, as you claim they did, they would have helped me anyway."

"I can't see that. It is difficult enough to make people part with their money for no particular reason. Especially Americans are known for—to use their own expression—wanting their money's worth. They are not always after financial profit. Sometimes they want publicity, or just an expression of gratitude. None of them, as far as I know, want to pay some hundred thousand dollars for the pleasure of being thrown down the stairs."

"You are very confusing," Alexandra said dryly. "I never know what to believe of the many contradictory things you tell me. One day you tell me that all Americans are anxious to help me, that they're going to finance my litigation, and then you declare that no American is ever going to do anything for me. And when I get exasperated and suspicious you get mad. It really is enough to drive a much healthier person crazy."

Max sighed. Was it going to be another quarrel?

"I've never told you that anybody would help you for the pleasure of being insulted," he said. "I did tell you that I knew a few Americans who would

perhaps be willing to help you. In fact, all of them responded more readily than I could ever hope. But you didn't like any of them and, after the first or the second meeting, barred them from your presence. They naturally felt insulted and refused their help. It all seems quite clear and in no way shows that I was giving you contradictory information."

"Of course not. You are tricky enough to prove that black is white and that white is black. Your main pleasure seems to be to insult me by telling me that I am a fool, an ill-mannered person. You are, of course, most anxious to kiss me. God knows what else you would have done to me if I weren't constantly on my guard. But when I ask you to marry me, which is the only honorable thing for you to do under the circumstances, then you find one million obstacles." Alexandra moved away from Max and assumed a proud, regal pose. "Of course, I have nobody to blame but myself. I should have known better than to permit any familiarities to a man of your low origin. My misfortune is that I always trust people. I have also been brought up in such a democratic way. I was led to believe that all human beings are human after all, and that even a commoner might be decent. Life taught me differently. Thus I don't blame you, because you are not responsible for your blood. But now that I see the real situation I must

assure you that I shall never agree to be the toy of an immoral roué. You disgust me. I wish I could turn the clock back to the time before I met you here. I was then so happy. My case proceeded wonderfully. Everybody was anxious to help me. You've made a mess of everything. You've compromised me by sitting day and night alone with me. All this cannot be undone. The best I can do is to stop before everything is lost. Thank God, I made it impossible for you to ruin me completely. This at least I did not permit. But now I want you to go, and I hope never to see you again."

"Your Highness should not worry about that. There isn't the slightest danger of your seeing me again," said Max dryly, getting up from the sofa and bowing officiously. He waited for a few seconds so as to give Alexandra the opportunity to give him her hand, but she showed no such intention. Max turned on his heel and left the room.

CHAPTER NINE

MAX WALKED OVER TO FIFTH AVENUE. ARrived at the corner, he stopped and looked around with admiration. He had always thought that he hated this tasteless and offensively rich thoroughfare. A street of rich shops, of an impudent display of wealth, to the exclusion of all art and of every vestige of nature. Not a tree, except the sickly plants in front of the Public Library. But now Fifth Avenue had suddenly assumed a new aspect. It still was offensively rich, especially for an impecunious artist. It still was rather tasteless. But the big lanterns winked to Max good-naturedly and a light breeze filled his nostrils with the aroma of the sea.

Two girls passed Max, giggling, their alluring soft

loins moving to the rhythm of their step. A living caricature of a Jew, a big derby hat resting on his protruding ears, passed him. Another girl. One probably could have her for ten or fifteen dollars. A reverend gentleman in a collar buttoned on the back of his neck, what Russians call a collar multiplied by minus one. Judging by the expression of his face the man of God was carrying all the sorrows of the world in his rotund stomach. It was probably the girl before him who plunged him into such despair. Probably he bemoaned her fate in the Beyond, and perhaps it was simply that he couldn't spare ten dollars.

The lanterns and the shops, the Jew, the girl, and the pastor all appeared to Max very funny, and pleasantly so. It was all somehow cozy. It pleased Max to think that at a distance of some fifteen blocks up the Avenue was his apartment. He remembered the painting which he was preparing for an exhibition. It progressed very satisfactorily. Somewhere, deep in his heart, shimmered a faint regret over the loss of a charming little child, of a touchingly beautiful Madonna he had once met. But this regret could not diminish the feeling of immense relief which prevailed in him. It seemed to him that with every step he was moving away from some bad dream that had tortured him for the last weeks. Never again would he listen to that delirium about the restoration of

empires, never again would he be in the ridiculous position of having to kiss a lady, all the while trying to observe the rigid etiquette of Eighteenth Century Versailles. Never would he have to breathe that sickening air of regal passions, medieval dust, Byzantine megalomania, and litigations over somebody's inheritance. It was like emerging from a deep pit of horrors back to the surface of the earth. The unreality of the world he had just left was alone sufficient to unbalance one's mind. Whatever one could say about Fifth Avenue, it was at least real, very real indeed.

"What a nice street," Max said to himself. "Ah, what a pleasant sea breeze."

In this happy mood Max reached his studio. He was still trying to open the door with his key when he heard his telephone ringing furiously. He rushed into the studio and, without turning on the light, took off the receiver.

"Hello!" he called.

"I want to talk to Baron von Waldenscherna," said a man's voice. It spoke in English, but with an unmistakable Russian accent. It even pronounced "von Waldenscherna" correctly.

"On the wire."

"I want to talk to——" decidedly it was a Russian.

"Yes, yes, I am talking. Baron von Waldenscherna is on the wire. What can I do for you?"

"I just wanted to warn you to withdraw from the affairs of Duchess Alexandra Petrovna."

"What? Who is this speaking?"

"It doesn't make any difference who is speaking. I am giving you a warning. If you make another move against Duchess Mavrikia Alexandrovna it will have the gravest consequences for you."

"Listen, you there," said Max, changing into Russian. "I'm not going to be intimidated by mountebanks like you, whoever you are. What's your name?"

"You don't need my name," answered the voice, also in a perfect Russian. "Your cursing won't help you, either. You'll refrain from all further activity in favor of Duchess Alexandra Petrovna. You will also stop that newspaper publicity, which is insulting to Duchess Mavrikia Alexandrovna."

"You are grinding nonsense, sir," retorted Max. "I've never had anything to do with publicity of any kind."

"I don't know who has to do with it. But I know that you can stop it. Two American newspapers, describing the case, hinted that Duchess Mavrikia Alexandrovna wasn't quite honest in her claims. Well, you'll stop that."

"What exactly are you threatening me with?"

"Well, people are wont to die, you know."

"But it takes men of another caliber than a coward like you, or whomever you may represent, to intimidate me!" shouted Max.

"Now, listen, Baron, I don't see why you should curse at me so much," resumed the voice in a very subdued tone. "I personally never had anything against you. I'm giving you a friendly warning, that's all. Besides, I represent a lady of high station whom you know quite well. In fact, you had a conference with her recently. You surely wouldn't insult her. She charged me to obtain your assurance that you'll abide by the demands I am forwarding. What's the answer you want me to deliver to the lady?"

"My answer is that your lady of high station ought to creep under the devil's tail!"

Max slammed down the receiver. "Some nerve that young bitch has!" he exploded. "I'll show her how to threaten me!"

He turned on the light. The first thing he saw was a letter on his desk. He tore it open and read:

DEAR FRIEND:

I trust you will believe that I am writing this moved solely by my friendship for you. I have always been

your sincere admirer. I still admire you. The fight you have put up for D. A. showed you to be a real *chevalier sans peur et sans reproche*. But I implore you to abandon this case. You have done all you could or should do. You can gain nothing more for D. A. But I know from unimpeachable sources that if you make another move you will endanger not only your own life but also that of D. A. This you have no right to do. I implore you again to withdraw. Believe me that this is not vain gossip. Also believe that I am not forwarding a threat to you. I happen to be your unknown admirer in the camp of your enemies. I am merely giving you the warning to save both you and D. A.

A Friend Among Enemies.

"A thousand devils!" exclaimed Max. "This has failed me yet! Friend among enemies! I bet I know this friend. I saw that friend but yesterday. Well, I'll show them!"

He took off the receiver and asked for the number of a newspaper syndicate whose manager was his personal friend. As Max counted, his friend was still in his office.

"Hello, Bill? Max talking. Listen, Bill, you were pestering me for a statement about that Alexandra affair. Do you still want it?"

"Sure I want it," answered Bill.

"Well, then, take this down: In view of the many

conflicting reports circulated about the case of Her Imperial Highness Duchess Alexandra Petrovna von Lichtenfelsen, and in view of my intimate knowledge of the said case, I feel it my duty to make the following explanation: Contrary to the usual version, no mystery of any kind is attached to the case. The plain fact is that Duchess Alexandra's aunt, Duchess Mavrikia, is trying to defraud her niece of a fortune of twenty million dollars left to Duchess Alexandra by her late father, Duke Peter. I can characterize Duchess Mavrikia's conduct in no other way but as an attempt at highway robbery. Fortunately, however, the courts have so far prevented Duchess Mavrikia from defrauding her niece."

"Jiminy crickets," said Bill. "That's a hot statement, all right. But listen, Max, it's criminal libel."

"No libel at all," answered Max. "That old frog Mavrikia would have to bring suit against either you or me in the state of New York. And the law here is that a true statement does not constitute libel. Now, if you'll print this, I'd undertake to prove to any court that this is true. But you can rest assured this confounded Mavrikia will guard herself well against suing me. To add some thrill to your story, you can say that I've received two murder threats to-night. One by telephone and one by letter."

"Great! I think it's worth taking a chance on.

Thanks a lot, Max. I surely will have fun writing this story. Anything else?"

"No, that'll be all. Good-night, Bill."

"Good-night, old man. Sleep well and be careful. I don't want you bumped off by some of your crazy Russians."

"Have no fear of that. They're such a pack of cowards they wouldn't dare to commit suicide, much less murder. Well, good-night."

Max hung up the receiver and began to pace his studio. "That's that," he said to himself. "The devils! Threatening me! I wonder, though, shall I let Miss Jones know about it?" He walked for a while up and down, rubbing his chin pensively. "Ah, it's all bosh," he decided. "They'll never dare to do a thing. No use spreading panic among old ladies."

But no sooner had Max reached this decision than his telephone rang again.

"Now what?" he grumbled. He took off the receiver and instantly recognized Alexandra's voice.

"Come at once! Come at once!" she panted.

"But I can't come to you at this late hour," protested Max.

"Ach, but I tell you, you must come at once. Never mind the hour. Miss Jones wants to see you also. You must come right away. I am in terrible danger." She hung up.

It was a mocking, almost grim Fifth Avenue which spread itself before Max when he started on his way to Miss Jones's house. He tried in vain to remember how it was that he had considered himself, only half an hour ago, free from that world of duchesses. What an irony of fate. Never had he been free from it, not for a single moment. How could he have believed in the earnestness of Alexandra's quarrel? But what was it now? Had she simply invented some foolishness to get him back, or had she received the same threats as he did? At any rate it was a terrible nuisance. He was tired and wanted to go to bed. He felt like a prisoner who has broken his shackles and escaped, only to be recaptured one block away from his prison. His only consolation was that by going back to Alexandra he was defying that impudent Irina with her crazy murder threats. Yes, that was the only good thing about it. He was going to show Irina just how much he cared about her threats. He remembered Jimmy Brooks and laughed.

"Poor Jimmy," thought Max. "He's paying a heavy price for the honor of being married to a duchess, and then a sort of second-rate duchess too. Irina is probably breaking all her furniture on Jimmy's head at this moment."

Max was pleased to find that Alexandra at least

had played no trick on him. He was indeed expected. The chief butler, who ordinarily would long ago have been in bed at this hour, opened the door and rushed Max into the drawing room. Miss Jones and Alexandra were sitting together on a sofa: Alexandra, pale and frightened; Miss Jones, with the resolute expression of an old bulldog ready to bite.

"It is very kind of you to come at this hour, my dear Baron," Miss Jones greeted him. "We wanted to see you because Her Highness has just been threatened over the telephone with murder."

"So have I. In addition I have also received an anonymous letter with a similar threat," said Max cheerfully.

"But this is terrible!" exclaimed Miss Jones. "It's simply horrid! I don't see how you can laugh?"

"It's all bosh," said Max.

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Alexandra. "I know they are going to murder both of us. I told you so long ago!"

"Nobody is going to murder us," reassuringly said Max. "It's simply our dear Duchess Irina amusing herself in her own way."

"Duchess Irina? You mean to say that these threats come from Duchess Irina?" exclaimed Miss Jones. "But this is an unheard-of thing. She must be a real heathen!"

"I know very little about her religious affilia-

tions," said Max, "but my advice is to pay no attention to this nonsense. It might be well to report the threat against Her Imperial Highness to the police, though."

"I've done it already," said Miss Jones. "I also want to make it clear to you that I personally am not in the least afraid." She frowned ferociously and clenched her fat little fist. "I'm a fighter! Nobody's going to frighten Emmy Jones! I'll defy King George himself with his whole fleet, if necessary! If I am at all worried, it is only because of this dear little child of ours." She put her arm tenderly around Alexandra. "And also on your behalf, Baron. I've already done everything I could. We've searched the house for bombs but didn't find any. I've telephoned to the police, and they are going to have a plain-clothes detective stationed at the house for a while. I also telephoned to a detective agency. The men will be over in a few minutes. The Duchess is also moving to another floor. Her room wasn't very safe. One could creep to her window along the edge of the roof. But we called you to discuss the general situation and decide what to do further. We also wanted to know your opinion as to where the threats are coming from. Finally we want to know what measures of precaution you are taking yourself."

"This is very touching of you." Max bowed in turn

to both ladies. "On one point I can enlighten you. The threats come from Duchess Irina."

"Do you really believe it?" asked Miss Jones. "To me it seems inconceivable."

"I don't merely believe it, Miss Jones, I know it. They told me so themselves over the telephone and asked for a message to the Duchess."

"Perfectly preposterous! What message did you give?"

Max chuckled. "I'm sorry, I can't repeat it. But it was quite to the point."

Alexandra began to laugh with her enchanting, deep laughter.

"I can imagine!" she exclaimed. "He's an awful man, our Max! Ha-ha-ha, I just can imagine the kind of message he sent to Irina. She'll burst."

Miss Jones chuckled good-naturedly.

"Couldn't we then have Irina arrested?" she asked. "The lady seems to imagine that she's still in Russia. She's mistaken. I don't care if she's ten times a highness. To my mind the right place for her is in jail."

"I think so, too," said Alexandra, her eyes glittering. "Yes, I want her to be put in jail. Baron, you must put her in jail!"

"I'm afraid I can't do it. The fact is that I have

no evidence and no witnesses. The letter I received has no reference whatever to Irina. They told me about it over the telephone. Even then they didn't mention her name, but simply said 'a lady of high station with whom you recently had a conference,' or something like that. To me it is obviously Irina. But that's no valid evidence. Any crank can ring somebody on the telephone and deliver a death threat, say, from me. But I can't be held responsible for that. Least of all, if my name hasn't even been directly mentioned. Besides, my personal opinion is that Irina doesn't have to be put in jail, but rather in a sanatorium for the feeble minded."

"I can see that this is a complicated matter," said Miss Jones. "But what are you doing to protect yourself?"

"Oh, I've done everything. You see, they demanded among other things, that I should stop any publicity unfavorable to Duchess Mavrikia. So I called up a newspaper friend of mine and gave him a statement, calling Duchess Mavrikia a fraud and a highway robber. To-morrow it will appear in some hundred papers all over the United States and also in many papers in Europe. That ought to take the wind out of them."

"Oh, you've done that?" Alexandra looked at

Max with unconcealed admiration. "This is simply wonderful. I just can see Irina and Aunt Mavrikia reading such a statement."

Miss Jones frowned. "But listen, my dear Baron, this is no way to protect yourself," she said.

"Of course it is. The very best way, in fact. Even if they had any real intention of killing me, they couldn't do it now, for it would be too obvious. Besides, it teaches them a lesson. I can assure you that Duchess Mavrikia is not going to like my statement. She and Duchess Irina will guard themselves from making any more murder threats."

At this moment the butler announced the arrival of private detectives. Miss Jones asked Max to go with her to look them over. They found two individuals who looked like veteran bandits. One of them had a scar across his face. Both wore pistols in their trouser belts. They bowed and smiled, but their smiles made Max shiver. A long conference followed. It was at last decided that one of the detectives would remain outside and the other sit in the hall. They were to be relieved in the morning by two other men. But first of all they wanted to be paid a deposit of $100. Max gasped. He personally felt more inclined to pay $100 for keeping these men out, rather than for having them guard the house. He hoped that Miss Jones would find the price prohibi-

tive, but the old lady didn't wink with one eye. She left the hall and soon returned with a pack of bills in her hand. Max dropped his monocle. How much better one could use $100, he thought. After this Miss Jones and Max returned to the drawing room, where Alexandra was anxiously awaiting them.

"Now we are safe," announced Miss Jones triumphantly.

"Indeed you are," said Max. "If those two men are not going to rob you, there is nothing in the world you should fear after that."

"Do you think that they don't look reliable?" queried Miss Jones.

"Reliable? My God, I think they are reliable, but chiefly as expert gangsters. How good they are as detectives I do not venture to say."

Miss Jones chuckled. "It's only their appearance," she said. "It is a very reliable agency."

"I'm glad of that," said Max. "Still, I wouldn't keep them for too long."

"But what are we going to do about him?" asked Alexandra, pointing with her finger at Max.

This familiarity and genuine solicitousness touched him deeply.

"Don't worry about me, Alexandra Petrovna. I assure you I am quite safe."

"I don't know about that," retorted Miss Jones.

"Of course you're not safe!" exclaimed Alexandra. "Miss Jones, we must do something with him. We can't afford to have him killed, can we? Couldn't we keep him here for a few days?"

"Why, I'd be delighted!" said Miss Jones. "Really, my dear Baron, Her Imperial Highness is wisdom incarnate. Of course you should stay with us, at least until this whole affair is cleared up. Her Imperial Highness is right. We can't afford to lose you."

"I really am deeply touched, and cannot tell you how much I appreciate your kindness," said Max. "But really and truly, I am in no danger. I assure you that all these threats mean nothing at all."

"Well, I personally am not easily frightened," said Miss Jones. "But I don't believe you ought to take too many chances. We all know that you are a very brave young Baron, and all that, but your bravery would avail us little if you got killed. You know perfectly well that the whole outcome of the case depends practically on you. Isn't it so, Your Imperial Highness?"

"Of course. What could I do without him? But you know, Waldenscherna is a Finn, and the Finns are terribly stubborn. He probably expects us to go down on our knees and beg him with tears in our eyes to preserve his young life for us."

"Well, let's try that. I'm a practical woman. If I

can achieve something by standing on my knees, I'll get down on them," declared Miss Jones.

"I assure you there's no necessity for that," said Max. "And I really appreciate ever so much your invitation. But I am an old bachelor, you know, and just like to have all my books and everything around me."

"No, no, we can't risk Waldenscherna's safety!" Alexandra exclaimed again.

"I'm quite of your opinion, my dear Duchess," agreed Miss Jones. "But what can we do with him?"

"Kidnap him," suggested Alexandra.

They all began to laugh.

"At any rate," said Miss Jones. "We can't leave matters as they are. We must take some action. I don't intend to tolerate it, that my guests in my house should be threatened with murder. You can't imagine, my dear Baron, how this affected Her Imperial Highness. I was present when the telephone rang, and I saw how she took the receiver, and almost immediately the poor child turned ashen white. I thought she would faint. I couldn't understand what it was all about, and when she told me I just couldn't believe my ears. It's an outrage, I'm not going to stand for anything like that!"

"There's a very simple way of stopping this business," said Max. "Inform Jimmy Brooks about it, or

better still, his lawyer. He has a very good lawyer, you know, who certainly wouldn't appreciate such charming jokes on the part of his client's wife."

"That's an excellent idea!" Miss Jones exclaimed enthusiastically. "Why didn't I think of it myself? But then of course I couldn't have thought that Irina is back of all this. You are quite right, my dear Baron. That is indeed the thing to do. By the way, the Brookses' lawyer is a very good friend of my brother Orville. I'll tell him about all this not later than to-morrow."

"This makes it still easier," said Max. "Now, everything having been settled, won't Her Imperial Highness go to bed? You look very pale and tired, Highness."

"Oh, no, no," Alexandra said hurriedly. "I couldn't go to bed just now. I'm still too frightened. Couldn't you stay a little longer?"

"Of course, we shall stay as long as you want us to," said Miss Jones, patting Alexandra's hand. "As a matter of fact, it isn't even very late. We'll sit up all night, if you wish." She turned to Max. "I really don't think that it would be well for Her Highness to go to bed right now. She won't be able to sleep, that's certain. And alone, in the dark, she'll have God knows what frightening thoughts. Besides, while I don't expect anything to happen, it might

be wiser to stay awake a little longer. One never knows. If anything should happen, it'll be much better if we are all together and not asleep."

Max didn't feel convinced, but he naturally could raise no objections. Miss Jones did her best to entertain both Alexandra and Max. She was a talkative old lady, and it seemed that she could remember all the society gossip as far back as the days of George Washington. She talked and talked in her squeaky and good-natured voice, Alexandra staring at her with round eyes, Max struggling heroically against sleep. It was half-past two in the morning when Alexandra at last arose from the sofa.

"I think we really must let Waldenscherna go home," she said with a solicitous smile which penetrated the very depths of Max's heart. "He's tired, our poor boy. But, really, Baron, couldn't you stay here for the night?"

"Thank you ever so much, but I'd rather go home," answered Max. "I'm sure that neither of us is in any danger. Nothing is going to happen."

"Of course nothing is going to happen," Miss Jones said reassuringly.

"Well, I hope not," said Alexandra. "But do come in to-morrow," she added, turning to Max and giving him her hand.

From the tone of her voice, the pitiful expression

of her eyes, the warm pressure of her hand, Max understood that she was profoundly apologizing for the quarrel they had had earlier in the evening. But by now he had almost forgotten that quarrel himself. He felt deeply moved by Alexandra's fear for his safety and by her frank declaration in Miss Jones's presence that she could do nothing without him. He kissed her hand tenderly.

"I shall be happy to come. Would three o'clock be convenient to you?"

"Couldn't you come at two?"

"Yes, do come at two," intervened Miss Jones. "You must stay here more as long as this situation lasts. As a matter of fact, I would feel much safer if you would live with us for a week or two. But if you refuse to be persuaded, you must at least stay here as much as possible. And you know that this house is completely at your disposal."

Max left with endless assurances of gratitude and a promise to come every day and stay for a longer time.

CHAPTER TEN

APPARENTLY MAX WAS RIGHT IN DISMISSING the murder threats as an empty gesture. Week passed after week, but neither Alexandra nor Max received any more of them. But Alexandra did not forget them. They left a deep impression on her and must have made clearer to her the value of having a loyal friend. She was also very pleased with Max's calm behavior, as well as with his public statement about Duchess Mavrikia. Be that as it may, instead of dismissing Max, Alexandra, on the contrary, tried to attach him to her more than ever.

She began to invite him for earlier hours and keep him longer in the evenings. She also wanted to know

about everything that he was doing while not in her presence and began to hate everything in Max's life wherein she herself had no part. But aside from Alexandra Max was interested in nothing except his work. Alexandra began to hate his work. This was indeed unfortunate. It was in vain that Max tried to explain to her that he had to make a living. Her invariable answer was:

"It is impossible to serve two masters. You serve either me or your art. A man who is in charge of my affairs should not be doing anything else."

For Max it was equally impossible to persuade Alexandra as it was to abandon his art. Thus, he had to resign himself to constant conflicts between the two and accept the best compromises possible. He began to get up earlier in the morning and go to bed later at night. This increased his working hours but soon began to undermine his forces. Even then, every once in a while he had to ask Alexandra for a day's leave, in order to complete some urgent job. This never failed to provoke a more or less stormy scene. Generally Alexandra punished him for such impertinence by barring him from her presence for two or three days. Max felt ashamed that these "exiles," as Alexandra called them, often gave him pleasure. He tried to hide it from Alexandra and preferred not to think about it much himself.

It was on one of these days of "exile" that in Max's studio appeared the beautiful Murochka. She opened her overcoat and threw herself on the sofa.

"Well," she said, "when the mountain refuses to come to the prophet, the prophet goes to the mountain, so here I am."

"Indeed here you are," said Max. "And I am perfectly delighted to see you. I only wish to take exception to what you've just said. I never refused to come to you, but——"

"You don't have to say anything further, Max," Murochka interrupted him. "I know it all. You have been so terribly busy, so much work to do, and then of course the affairs of Her Imperial Highness, but all this time you wanted nothing more than to see me, you longed for me, body and soul—patati-patata-patati-patata. . . . Oh-la-la! Men are all that way. You men are really terrible."

"I've heard some such statement before," said Max, with a grin.

"You certainly must have. Every woman says the same thing, for men are terrible. I just hate them!"

"I'm sure you do, nor do I blame you much. You know, the famous Ilovaysky started his history of Russia with the pointed statement: 'The Slavs represent a mixture of good and bad qualities.' I think that very much the same can be said of all men in

general, whether they are Slavs, Germanics, or even Chinamen."

"Undoubtedly, but there are men in whom bad qualities seem to predominate."

"As, for instance, Max Waldenscherna."

"Exactly. In spite of this I am happy to see that you are still alive."

"And why shouldn't I be?"

"You are asking me? You have been threatened with murder, not I."

"Ho-la! Where did you hear that?"

"The whole colony is talking about it. And I must warn you, Max, it is very serious. Colonel Podushkin said that you haven't a chance to get away with your life after insulting Duchess Mavrikia as you did."

"Really? You mean that brave colonel who now serves as a doorman in a hotel?"

"That's the one. But you don't have to sneer at him just because he is old and can do nothing else."

"No, I suppose I shouldn't. But as you so pointedly stated, he can do nothing else. He certainly can't murder me; he wouldn't know how."

"I didn't say that he is going to be the one to murder you. But he's always well informed."

"That's easy for a doorman."

"Max, you are an impossible snob. Fate shall punish you yet."

"Quite possible, my love, but why all this sermonizing?"

"Oh, for no special reason, except that I pity you. Incidentally, I am very mad at you."

"Aha, now we are coming to the point. I could see right away that something is wrong. Why are you mad at me?"

"Because you are boasting everywhere that I have been in love with you but that you didn't care for me at all. Did you forget the French verses you wrote for me?"

"Indeed I didn't, but O Heavenly Creature, whoever told you anything like that about me is a dirty liar. To whom did I ever boast in so ridiculous a fashion?"

"Burachkoff told me that you've said to some lady who knows one of his friends that a blonde woman has been in love with you, but that you didn't love her."

"*Donnerwetterparapluie!* as our allies, the Germans, would say. Who is the friend, and who is the lady, when and where did I see any of them, why should I have told anybody such a foolish thing, and finally, if all this were true, which it isn't, are you the only blonde on this planet?"

"H-m-m." Murochka's expression softened. "I

never thought of that. Are you sure that you didn't say anything like that about me?"

"Absolutely certain. I can swear to it standing on one leg. And you know that if you stand on one leg while giving an oath, the oath means nothing."

"You are incorrigible. However, what made me particularly mad was your statement that you have never loved me. I still keep your verses, you know."

"Why, darling, I'm ready to write you more verses any time. I adore you now as ever. I must confess, though, that I never admitted publicly that you were my mistress, first because you weren't, and second because I thought that you might not like it. But if you want me to——"

"Say whatever you wish, but if I ever find out that you deny having loved me, I'm going to publish your verses in the newspapers."

"On the editorial page of the *Times,* I hope. That would be lovely. It might even start a new career for me, that of a poet."

"Ah, Max, Max, I'm no longer mad at you, once you deny your guilt, but I'm still displeased with you, and I'm sorry for you."

"Holy Virgin, what's happened now?"

"Oh, I mean, of course, your conspiracy."

"What conspiracy?"

"Max, you don't have to pretend to me. I told

you some two months ago that I know all about your conspiracy. Events proved that I was right, and I also learned a lot more about you. But really you are carrying the thing too far."

"Oh, do you mean my attempts to place Duchess Alexandra on the throne? Yes, you should see them tremble in Moscow. Just received a cable from comrade Stalin. Says he: 'Max, Max, have a heart. Spare me, if only for my kiddies.' "

"Max, you are a cynic. But now everybody knows that you are not trying to put Alexandra on the throne."

"Well, well, that's nice. I see there's nothing one could hide from those clever Russians. But, then, what do you accuse me of now?"

"Of what you actually are doing. It is now quite clear that you used Alexandra's case merely to compromise the imperial family."

"Is that so? And why should I want to do that?"

"To prevent the restoration of monarchy, of course. Max, look here, what's that?"

Murochka opened her hand and showed to Max a small decoration.

"That? Why, it's an insignia of a Mason of the thirty-second degree."

"Ha-ha-ha! That's how men like you are caught."

Max looked at Murochka in bewilderment.

"Dearest, is one of us going crazy? I don't seem to be able to follow you any more."

"Ha-ha-ha! No, no, Max! Neither of us is crazy; we are both perfectly normal. But even the wisest conspirators always give themselves away in this manner. So you are one of the three?"

"Oh, you happiness of my eyes, shall I call the doctor? Now I am one of the three, *Du lieber Gott!*"

"Yes, you are!"

"But who are the three of whom I am one?"

"You know perfectly well whom I mean: the three Masons of the thirty-third degree who rule the whole Masonic organization and overthrow all monarchies. You don't have to deny it. We know much more about your Masonic secrets than you think we do. And now you yourself got caught very naïvely. It was a former Russian prosecutor, whose name I shan't tell, who suggested to me recently to try this method on you. You see, they had, not so long ago, a vote through most of the monarchistic organizations, and you were placed on the black list. We were just talking about that, and it was then that Burachkoff and that jurist told me all about you. At first I refused to believe. Then they gave me this insignia and said that the easiest way of catching a culprit is to take him by surprise. So they told me to talk to you of all sorts of things and then ask you

suddenly what this insignia means. You would be quite off your guard, they explained, and would give yourself away by saying at once that this is a Masonic insignia of the thirty-second degree. That's just what you've done, ha-ha!"

Murochka looked at Max triumphantly, but Max burst into such laughter that his monocle fell to the floor, and he wasn't able to answer at once.

"My Lord, my Lord!" he said at last. "You have a most intelligent sort of friends, my dear. Did it ever occur to you that this insignia of yours bears a very plain and legible inscription which anybody could read?"

Murochka looked at the insignia, and her beautiful face expressed disappointment and embarrassment.

"You're right," she said with a sigh. "Even so, I believe that you are one of the three chief Masons."

"Of course I am! To you I won't deny it, but to you alone, ha-ha-ha! I can see that our dear compatriots are as usual busy with a lot of important work, such as chasing after Antichrist and what not. What else do they say about me?"

"Oh, a lot of things. They say that you are getting fabulous sums from some mysterious sources, from Moscow probably. Also, that you've made Alexandra sign such a paper whereby all her fortune will

go to you as soon as she wins it. Duchess Irina actually went to see Miss Jones in order to warn her against you."

"Miss Jones told me about that. Very charming of Duchess Irina. Well, dear, but have you nothing more interesting to tell me than all this fool gossip?"

"It isn't fool gossip, Max, and you know it. You've antagonized the whole Russian colony, not only here but in Europe also. Of course, you don't know what people are saying behind your back, but it isn't nice, I assure you."

"Indeed it isn't. Above all, it isn't intelligent. I don't mean just what they say about me, but that obsession about Masons who together with the Jews are supposedly trying to conquer the world for Antichrist. Why, my dear, it is nothing short of mass insanity."

"It's natural for you to say so, once you are in that diabolical conspiracy yourself. Why, I've read an article in the *Double Eagle* wherein they prove, beyond doubt, that the Y. M. C. A. is a Masonic organization, that it is run by Jews, and that it spreads Soviet propaganda all over the world."

"Yes, my dear, I've read that wonderful article too, and laughed myself to tears. Why, the people are absolutely crazy! And to think that the official organ of the Russian monarchistic party is publishing such

delirious stuff! Think of it yourself, the Y. M. C. A. run by Jews and making Soviet propaganda! Now, did you ever? Before you know it, they are going to accuse Calvin Coolidge of being a Jew and a Bolshevik."

"Suppose they do. I wouldn't be at all surprised. Look at his nose, and anyway, Senator Borah is a Jew, and all American finances are in the hands of Morgan, who is another Jew."

"Ha-ha-ha! For the love of Heaven! I suppose Henry Ford is still another Jew and the Pope of Rome is my colleague in the ranks of the Masonic government. How in God's name can you believe all such junk?"

"No junk at all. It's all quite logical. The struggle between Christ and Satan."

"Oh, I've heard that one, too. But I think it's a mistake. I personally am more inclined to believe that it is a struggle between Buddha and the devil's grandmother. Oh, immortal gods! And this is the modern Twentieth Century, and the beliefs of the most civilized Russian aristocracy! One really ought to weep, but I prefer to laugh."

"Nothing to laugh about, I assure you," Murochka said angrily. "But there's still another matter I wanted to ask you about."

"What is it, my angel?"

"You have no time at all to visit me, of course, but how about that red-haired girl?"

"What red-haired girl?"

"Again you are trying to look naïve. Oh, Max, I'm telling you, all men are alike. I've already seen two magazine covers, one book jacket, and several advertisements with that red-haired girl. You know, I'm watching your work. I can see the same red-haired girl looking at me right now from what appears to be the beginning of a big painting. And finally, yesterday you passed me in the street, with that same girl clinging to your arm, and you yourself were so interested in your conversation that you didn't as much as notice me."

"My profoundest apologies. As for the lady with the red hair, why, she's just an acquaintance of mine."

"Ha-ha, some acquaintance. You ought to have seen the expression on your face when you were talking to her. You were just melting, your eyes were simply glued to her countenance. It really isn't nice toward your duchess; it is bad policy from your own point of view also, Max."

"Another riddle. What has the lady with the red hair got to do with the Duchess?"

"That should be obvious enough to a man of your intelligence. There are a few people left who still

insist that you are simply the Duchess's lover, in which case there doesn't necessarily have to be anything sinister about the whole case. If you were Alexandra's lover, one could explain even your attack on Mavrikia as an emotional outburst. But now you advertise far and wide your red-haired mistress. Obviously then you are not the Duchess's lover, unless of course you have two mistresses, which doesn't look nice, either."

Max bit his lip.

"You are astonishing, Murochka. You can be so amusing, and then another time you seem to have no sense of humor of any kind. In this last case you are not only humorless but quite wrong in every respect. The Duchess is not and never has been my mistress, and the lady with the red hair is not my mistress either. Why can't I be seen in the street with a lady?"

"Well, perhaps you can. But to tell you the truth, this red-haired thing didn't even impress me as much of a lady. Why, she even has freckles, and she's obviously an American."

"Indeed she is."

"You men are queer. What attraction can you find in Americans? So vulgar, all of them. Indecent, too, and no conception of love."

"Ho-ho! I begin to feel flattered. Why, my beloved Murochka, but you are simply jealous."

"Jealous? The very idea! I simply state in a perfectly abstract manner that all American women are dreadfully vulgar, indecent, and void of any feeling. They do nothing but kiss and pet and run around without any skirts on. If I were a man, I would never look at an American woman."

"Perhaps if you were a man you would think differently. I personally admire American women tremendously. They are natural, cheerful, good-looking, clever." Max began to talk with enthusiasm, apparently quite forgetful of his own recent criticism of American women. "As for their short skirts, they only show that American women are less self-conscious than the Russian women are. I much prefer a woman in a short skirt, or without any skirt, to Russian ladies who do nothing but pull their skirts down and scream: 'Ach, you mustn't look.' That to me is really indecent."

Murochka was observing Max with an ironic smile.

"You've almost convinced me that you are not the Antichrist's prime minister after all," she said bitingly. "I thought that you were just a little careless in not hiding enough your immorality, but now I see that you are in love. And with whom? With a freckled, pantless American girl! Oh, Max! Your duchess certainly looks like a dried sturgeon, but she

is at least a duchess, whereas this freckled person——"

"Now, really, Murochka, I don't know what fly has bitten you to-day," Max interrupted her. "First you accuse me of heading a satanistic government that doesn't exist; then you accuse me of love affairs which I do not have; now you tell me that I am in love, which I am not. Is it by any chance that you yourself are in love with me?"

"Oh, I don't know—I thought so for a while myself, but I don't think so now. You are so sort of soft. Now, when I annoy my husband he screams, and at times even beats me. Why, last week I confessed to him that I am betraying him with a wealthy American, which was, of course, pure fiction, but he nearly choked me to death. For all his faults, he's still a man. But you? I am doing nothing but insulting you for the last half hour, and you do nothing but juggle with your atrocious monocle. Oh, God, isn't life a bore?"

Murochka yawned and sighed and stretched and cast at Max a glance wherein annoyance and irony were mixed with longing and adoration.

"No, I'm not going to be yours," she suddenly announced. "I'm telling you that I want to be loved by a real man, not by a sort of pedantic German who

asks women's permission, ha-ha-ha. No, no, you won't get me, Max."

"I am distressed," said Max sincerely enough. But the cause of his distress was not that Murochka refused to be his, but that she was in one of her bad moods, which made her presence insupportable.

For another half hour Murochka continued to moan, to complain and to tell Max all the unpleasant gossip about him that she had ever heard, and some of which she had probably invented herself. At last she emitted a final sigh and languidly strolled out of the studio. But Max's mood was spoiled. He felt irritable and restless. He tried to work, but the brush refused to obey him.

"The devil!" he grumbled. "Why does she have to loaf around other people's apartments when she's in a mood like that? Must be terrible to have her for a wife. I hope her husband will give her a good spanking to-night. But what shall I do now? The whole evening spoiled."

Almost mechanically he took off the receiver, and almost mechanically he called Nancy's number. But when he heard her voice his irritation immediately subsided, and when she declared that she would be happy to have supper with him in his studio he sighed with relief and returned to his work. Now his brush seemed to have come to reason, and by the time he

heard Nancy's feet running cheerfully up the stairs, he had done more work than he had himself expected.

After the supper Max started a fire in the fireplace and sat down at Nancy's side on the sofa.

"I like fireplaces," said Nancy.

"I love them," said Max. "When I was a child fire had an almost mystic attraction for me. In a way it still has. It always seems to me that my thoughts mix with the flames and fly with them up into the chimney, to dissolve in some infinite spaces. It is hard to explain, but fire helps me to think, or rather dream."

"You are very much of a dreamer, aren't you?" asked Nancy.

"Am I? I don't know, myself. But I think that my reputation is that of a very hard-boiled and cynical person."

"How absurd."

"Well, to tell you the truth, it does seem absurd to me. And yet somebody or other said that there can be no criticism, no matter how preposterous, which hasn't some particle of truth in it. If this is so, mine is a sad case. I seem to be real anathema to all of my compatriots."

"That isn't surprising. Really, dear, from what I've heard about Russians, they must be a bit crazy."

"I think they are, and yet I am a Russian myself."

"Perhaps you are an exception; perhaps this is also the reason that your compatriots dislike you."

"I should be very glad if this were so, but naturally I don't dare to make such assumptions myself. And yet, the longer I live, the less I am able to understand the Russians. There is something queer and something depressing about them. Of course, they themselves pretend that they are much deeper in soul and mind than the western Europeans are. I used to think so myself. But now I begin to doubt it. From what I've seen in life, people seldom talk of something which is really sacred to them. The most religious people never talk about God, at least not publicly. The most loving parents never talk about their children. Real artists never discuss their art in drawing rooms. Men seem to shield and safeguard their sanctuaries from prying eyes. If they are ready to discuss some subject in a market place it means that they consider that subject to be banal. I think this is the reason that so many professional preachers haven't the slightest religious feeling and that people who hold grand discourses on love have never experienced it. Now Russians always talk about their souls and seem to be digging into the very depth of them. I just wonder whether it isn't that in reality their souls are very shallow?"

"This is extraordinary. But you are saying just exactly what I've always felt," Nancy said eagerly. "Only I am always afraid to be ridiculed. But take Dostoevsky for instance. Everybody admires him, everybody finds him so deep. But I could never see what there is so deep about him. It is just as you say, I thought him very shallow. But of course I never dare to say anything like that. You just can't afford to."

"It is indeed extraordinary, Nancy, that we should have so similar ideas. Yes, yes, I just feel that way about Dostoevsky also. But naturally one isn't permitted to express any such opinion about him. It is blasphemy. The gentleman is just believed to own the monopoly on soul-digging. To me he is nothing but a terrifying explosion of incoherent verbosity that splashes all over whole volumes but really contains little sense, if any. Anyway, I hate that intellectual tyranny which demands the worship of established authorities."

"So do I, and yet one has to reckon with it, unless one wants to acquire the reputation of a moron," said Nancy.

"Exactly. Yes, but to come back to my own problems, here's the whole situation. Before the revolution of 1917 I worshipped everything Russian wholesale. Then the disillusionment began. A month

of the revolution made it clear to me that the lower classes in Russia are perfect barbarians. I assure you, it isn't because of my political prejudices that I'm saying this. I may be a monarchist myself, but I can easily understand and even feel sympathy for people of other political creeds. But the Russian revolution wasn't really in the least political. It was just an insurrection, first of the urbane proletariat, then of the peasants. Both classes disported themselves like real savages. You may say that all peasants and workmen are alike in all countries. But this only seems so. A peasant in western Europe has a certain amount of culture. The Russian has none, and what makes it the more tragic is the fact that eighty per cent. of the Russian population are peasants. Well, I lost my illusions in regard to the Russian lower classes. But I tried to convince myself that this was merely the result of unfavorable historical developments. I tried to vindicate the Russian people by claiming that they have enormous potentialities and that they proved it by having developed a most cultured and gifted intellectual class. My life as a refugee shattered those illusions also. The majority of the Russian aristocracy and intelligentsia, deprived by the revolution of their wealth and social position, reverted, I am sorry to say, to primitive conditions. They did, I admit, prove a tremendous capacity for passive re-

sistance. They survive against all odds, in a most surprising, nay, heroic, fashion. But they merely survive. I don't mean the economic side of it only. Most of them have gone down intellectually, morally, and in every other respect to the level of the lowest classes. Yes, they still boast about their titles, they still dream about becoming prime ministers, but they do nothing to achieve their ambitions. They prefer the economic security of humble manual work to the struggle and uncertainty which confronts one who wants to create something worth while out of nothing. Of real culture they displayed very little. In short, the supposed enormous cultural and intellectual gap that was said to exist between the Russian peasant and the Russian intellectual proved to be not so big, after all. One can easily recognize one in the other. And now, you see, I begin to wonder whether Russian literature is quite as great as it is said to be. I long ago lost my faith in the Russian Church, and now I have lost my faith in the Russian imperial family. So here you are, I am a Russian myself, and yet I feel how all the ties between me and Russia snap, one after another. It isn't a pleasant experience."

"And Duchess Alexandra?"

At some other time such a question coming from Miss Nancy Callaway would have bewildered and

most likely annoyed Max. At least, it would have caused him to wonder what prompted her to ask it. But this time he was completely absorbed in his own thoughts, and although he was talking about Russians in general, his thoughts were actually all focused on Alexandra. Therefore Nancy's question didn't surprise him. He didn't even raise his head to look at the expression of Nancy's face.

"Yes, Nance, it was just of Alexandra that I was thinking," he said, staring at the fire. "I still do not dare to admit it, but I am afraid that I begin to be disillusioned in Alexandra also. This is the first time that I make such admission, not only to another person, but even to myself. I hope and pray that I may be wrong. Perhaps it is simply that I am tired."

"Would it hurt you much to become disillusioned in Duchess Alexandra?" Nancy asked in a low voice.

"Yes, very much indeed," answered Max. "Very, very much indeed," he repeated slowly, inhaling the smoke of his cigarette. He reached for his glass of whisky and soda. "Yes, it would hurt me tremendously," he concluded.

"Poor Max," said Nancy, putting her hand over his. "I wish I could help you, but I don't know how."

"Dear, you are helping me. Why, I don't know what I'd do without you. Look at the people I'm surrounded with. The Brookses, Murochka, all those

Russians. When I look back at the last months I see complete darkness, with only a few light spots, which are the hours spent with Nancy."

She pressed his fingers.

"You are very kind to say so, dear. But I quite understand myself that I could offer you no adequate consolation." She paused. "You must forgive me, Max," she resumed with sudden vehemence, "but I just don't like that duchess of yours. Oh, I quite understand that you love her as you do—I don't think it could be different. But she must be a freak and a moron not to appreciate your love and devotion. I don't care if she is a duchess, or even a queen, but a woman who is blind to such love, to such loyalty, who instead of appreciating it causes you nothing but sorrow, just isn't a normal woman. There must be something very wrong with that duchess."

Now at last Max lifted his eyes and looked at Nancy with surprise.

"Now, what did you imagine there, Nance?" he asked, with a chuckle. "I am not in love with Alexandra."

"Oh," Nancy looked at him doubtfully. "You are simply trying to shield her. She doesn't respond to your love, and you know that it's rotten, and therefore try to make it appear that you aren't in love

with her yourself. But suppose she would agree to marry you to-morrow?"

"Why, my dear, that's just the whole trouble. Not only does she agree to marry me, but she demands that I should marry her. This is just one of the things that drive me crazy."

"What!" Nancy seemed dumbfounded. "The Duchess wants to marry you and you refuse?"

"The misery of it is that you can't refuse a duchess directly—that is, unless you are willing to cause her mortal offense. But you can make it clear to her that you do not want to marry her. And this is precisely what I have been trying to explain to Alexandra for the last couple of months, but so far without the slightest success. She just won't take any hints, and keeps on planning our wedding. Nay, she makes it appear as if I, and not she, was the one to make the proposal. I can't grasp it, and it is so totally different from my original conception of Alexandra that it really shocks me."

"I'll be darned!" exclaimed Nancy, her face suddenly brightening with a happy smile. "Why, Max, I was willing to bet anything that you were hopelessly in love with the Duchess."

"Which proves the danger of gambling. You see, I am a moralist, and always profit by every opportunity to pull a moral out of something."

"You are a clown," retorted Nancy and emptied in one breath her glass of whisky and soda. "How about another drink?" She gave Max her empty glass.

"Another little drink,
Another little drink
Won't do us any harm!"

chanted Max. "That was one of the first English songs I learned, years ago, back in Russia. I was then still a little boy, and we had a British diplomat for our neighbor. He was madly in love with his wife, but she betrayed him morning, noon, and night with every passer-by. When he knew her to be out with one of her countless lovers he would pull out a bottle of whisky and walk around it for hours, refilling his glass and singing:

"Another little drink,
Another little drink
Won't do us any harm."

"That's a nice song," declared Nancy. "But why is it that you don't want to marry your duchess? I begin to think that you are a bit crazy yourself."

"I see I have already fallen down from the pedestal of a love martyr you'd placed me on," said Max.

"So you have, but I think this is very much to your advantage. I like people who stand on the ground and not on pedestals."

"Well, if I keep on confessing to you, you may yet discover me in the gutter."

"That would be better still, for then I wouldn't feel so lonely. I've never been anywhere else myself and I need company. Now come on with your confession, old dear. I love to listen to confessions."

"My confession is hardly very amusing. I simply don't know what to think of the whole situation. I must tell you that I have been in love with Alexandra, but this was when I was a boy of nine or ten. I haven't been in love with her since. But on the first day of our meeting here, I felt a sort of adoration for her. Not as to a woman. I kissed her the very first evening, but only on the forehead and with a sort of feeling as if she were an ikon or something. Now we always kiss, but on my part it is rather brotherly. I felt much tenderness toward her; I still feel some of it. I always felt and still feel an enormous pity for her. I am very anxious to help her, to defend her, but what can I do if I just can't fall in love with her? But, you see, one day she made me understand that she expects me to marry her, and she interprets my whole attitude toward her as love. But I never did love her that way, even though I was ready to wor-

ship her and die a thousand deaths for her sake. On the other hand, it is only natural for such adoration to turn into a real love, but this didn't happen with me and Alexandra."

"That is, it didn't happen with you, but doesn't she have a crush on you?"

"Ah, here's the whole question. That's just what tortures me. Were I quite certain that she's in love with me I might force myself to marry her. Frankly, it would be a sort of martyrdom, because she has a terrible disposition. She flies into fits of anger; she sulks for days; oh, she can be intolerable. But she can also be adorable. One adores her one day and one hates the sight of her for another day. But gradually the hatred begins to overshadow love. That's just it. Mentally, I still try to love her; emotionally, she has become unbearable to me. Even when she is nice and charming, her very presence causes me such a strain that I could scream. What is the cause of this, I myself can't tell. But I doubt that I would have felt that way if she were truly in love with me."

"But why would she want to marry you unless she were in love with you?" asked Nancy.

"You are asking me, one after another, questions to which I myself can find no answer. Please never repeat to anybody what I am telling you now. I know I shouldn't tell such things to anybody, but

somehow I cannot hide anything from you. Also, I do need your opinion, because I myself can no longer see clearly in the matter. I suspect Alexandra of two things, neither of which is very nice. Now, if my suspicions are correct, Alexandra isn't at all the kind of person I thought her to be, and hardly is worth worrying about. But if I am wrong, then I must be a monster myself."

"Well, now——" Nancy interrupted him with a chuckle.

"Here's what I suspect," resumed Max. "I do think that I attract her in a way, but I think it is purely physical. I think that the poor child is terribly physical, without knowing it herself. What she really needs is a strong love affair, but consciously, she is extremely puritanic. Here is one of her tragedies. Now you know she is terribly exacting in matters of etiquette. She is also terribly proud. And yet she insists that I should enter her room without knocking at the door; she permits me all sorts of liberties; she rushes to me with ash trays whenever I pull out a cigarette—why, if I let a handkerchief drop to the floor, she runs to pick it up. But at the same time she doesn't show the slightest respect for me; she is often horridly insulting. What kind of an explanation could you find for all that? To me it

looks like a royal form of suppressed masochism—eh, what do you say?"

"Ha-ha-ha, dear, you mustn't mind that I laugh, but you really are a clown. However, I think you are quite right. Royal masochism, that's excellent. We ought to communicate that to Mr. Freud, so that he could increase his vocabulary of complexes."

"Why, this certainly is a job for Freud. I wish I could have him here at the moment. But there is still another suspicion I have regarding Alexandra. She is, of course, tremendously arrogant and very proud of being an imperial highness and a Duchess von Lichtenfelsen. But then, she isn't that legally. Officially she has to sign her name 'Alexandra Rosenkranz,' and I know that this is a real torture for her. Every time that she has to sign a check she is dying a thousand deaths, and when people call her 'Mrs. Rosenkranz' her eyes express such hatred and pain that it shivers one to look at her. But again, with that complex of hers, she doesn't let a day pass without repeating ten times to herself and to others that she is nothing but a Mrs. Rosenkranz, as she says herself, 'not even a decent commoner, but a Jew's wife.' And she dwells on that thought, until it has become a veritable mania. Now, of course, she hopes to win her case and in this manner have her title restored. But when is this going to happen? She knows as well

as I do that it can easily take years and years to unravel this mess. But this Rosenkranz business causes her such misery that it begins to look as if she might be willing to sacrifice even her litigation if she could only get some decent name right away. Now, you see, the name of Baroness von Waldenscherna is not so bad."

"To me it sounds like a symphony," said Nancy.

"I pretend not to understand your irony, dear. But really and truly, it isn't such a bad name, after all. We are not of royal blood, of course, but my ancestors were practically sovereign rulers of their domain long before anybody heard of the Lichtenfelsens, or even of the Romanoffs. Anyway, how much better it is to be called 'Lady Baroness' than 'Mrs. Rosenkranz.'"

"I should say so."

"As a matter of fact, all that I'm saying now is not even just a suspicion," said Max. "Alexandra can be pretty cynical, you know. She says quite often that she would much prefer to be Baroness von Waldenscherna rather than Mrs. Rosenkranz. But she never forgets to explain that were she still officially a Duchess von Lichtenfelsen it would be a terrible mésalliance for her to marry a plain baron. So she keeps on telling me that I should feel very flattered to get her, a duchess, for my wife. Now, such state-

ments on her part just turn everything in me upside down. God knows, to marry her would be a sacrifice on my part, under any circumstances. But I can imagine a situation when I would be willing to make that sacrifice. But for whom would I make it? For Alexandra, for the woman, for the human being Alexandra, not for some sort of puffed-up duchess. But she doesn't seem to understand that at all. She herself cannot conceive of being just a human being. She is first and above all a duchess. Furthermore, my title may be an humble one, but my coat-of-arms is ancient and without blemish. Now, dear, believe me, I am not suffering from any personal megalomania, and I do not particularly envy the woman who is going to marry me. But I have every reason to be proud of my name. If the Duchess von Lichtenfelsen considers it to be a mésalliance to marry a Baron von Waldenscherna, she just doesn't have to do it. The blood of my race would not improve a bit by an admixture of royal blood. Half of European royalties are upstarts as compared with my family, anyway."

"Max, you make me tremble."

"Oh, you can laugh at me, dear, as much as you want to. To you, all this may sound perfectly ridiculous. Perhaps it is. But it doesn't seem so to Alexandra. I naturally am judging her by her own standards. Then there are a lot of other unpleasant things

about her. As I said, she can be awfully enervating. She dreams about becoming an empress, and when she begins to discuss whom she is going to appoint to her cabinet, or to plan some sort of fantastic agrarian reforms, I just feel a pain under my nails. She is a paradoxical person. She has such a delightful sense of humor, and yet she can be utterly humorless. She can be an incarnation of innocence, and then again repellingly cynical. She can be as kind as an angel, but also as fierce as a devil. She can be amazingly clever, and then again a perfect moron. But in all her phases she is always frightfully depressing. Perhaps I am simply tired. It is a terrible strain to be spending with her eight hours daily and do my work on top of that. I am afraid that I won't hold out for much longer. I feel rotten, I'm tired, I'm getting irritable. But she pays not the slightest attention to that. In fact, she tries to hinder me in my work, because it makes her mad that I do something else, aside from attending to her affairs. To make it short, the real problem which confronts me is this: Either Alexandra is the lovely person I thought her to be, but suffering from natural aftermaths of her experiences and desperately in love with me. In that case I am nothing short of a criminal. The only decent thing for me to do, then, would be to marry her. But it makes me shudder even to think of that. Or else

all of Alexandra's goodness is but another illusion, and she is in reality a typical duchess, petty, cynical, ungrateful, incapable of any real feeling, malicious and stupid. And in that case I owe her nothing. But that would shatter my last and the most cherished illusion which I have preserved from my childhood. That would kill in me something very beautiful. That would be very, very hard indeed."

Nancy looked at Max worriedly.

"One thing I can tell you," she said. "You certainly are not a criminal. You are a dreamer and an idealist. And, darling, I don't want to shatter your illusions, but I'd do that rather than have you, after all that you have done for that duchess, torture yourself with the thought that you are in some way or another guilty toward her."

"But what if she actually loves me? And when I begin to think about it, I can well imagine how she could have mistaken my sort of abstract adoration for love."

"No, after what you've told me, I no longer believe that she loves you. I even begin to think that my first guess was after all correct. Perhaps I guessed wrong in so far as I thought that you wanted to marry her and that she refused. In reality, it is just the other way around. But in essence it's just as I said at first. Max, how can we distinguish between

different kinds of love? Suppose that you loved her, as you say, in an abstract manner. The fact remains that you loved her, that you have given her your whole heart, and that she is totally blind to your love and pays you back with ingratitude. Wasn't my original conception of the situation essentially correct?"

"Oh, I don't know. Could she really be so—so—how should I say it?—cheap? Has she nothing in her of that fairy queen, of that Madonna I imagined her to be? It is hard to comprehend. I still think that it might be all my fault. Perhaps I am the blind one."

"Nobody who is searching as much as you do for lovable qualities in another human being could be blind to that being's good traits. Think of it yourself, dear. You loved her and still love her. You want to force yourself to love her. You are trying to convince yourself that she is lovable, and in spite of all this you still see that she isn't lovable at all. How could that be possible if she were either lovable or loving?"

"It might be that I simply cannot endure her moods. But when I think how much she has suffered, I feel ashamed of myself for blaming her for those moods. Of course I am tired, terribly tired, and perhaps it is for this reason that she gets so much on my nerves. And when I think that perhaps she actually

loves me—when I think of the ugliness of the accusations I am ready to make against her——"

Max began to stare in the fire. For some time they remained silent.

"Listen, Max," Nancy said at last. "You are too good a person, you have too many gifts, you can have too enjoyable a future to ruin yourself for the sake of that ungrateful thing. I can well understand all that she meant and still means to you. But I think there is a point beyond which self-sacrifice becomes immoral, a sort of mental masochism, if you wish. And furthermore, don't you fear that she'll really suffer much if you leave her alone. She's too heartless to suffer. You are smashing yourself to pieces to save her, but how do you know that she really wants to be saved? After all, isn't it an anomalous situation that you, an outsider, should try to fix up her quarrel with her own relatives? Why can't she do it herself? Probably because she doesn't want to. She must be enjoying all that melodrama just as she enjoys the martyrdom of being a Mrs. Rosenkranz."

"Nancy, it is a terrible thing you are saying. The more terrible because I have similar thoughts at times myself, and I am afraid of them. You know I once said to Alexandra: 'Isn't it a pity that there are so many bad people in this world? If it weren't for them, one could enjoy life so much more.' And she

said: 'What would we do without the bad people? After all, they alone make life worth living. Whom could I fight if Aunt Mavrikia were a decent woman?' "

"Well, there you are. What else do you need? I assure you, Max, that Alexandra would enjoy you much more as a villain than she does as a hero. Why not give her that pleasure and quit?"

"Oh, Nancy, Nancy, I see that if you were in Eve's place in the Garden of Eden the history of mankind would not be different from what it is now."

"Sure it would be different. Do you think that it would take me seventy years, or whatever it took Eve, to put some sense into Adam? I'd have wisened him up in no time." Nancy began to laugh with an irresistible and happy laughter which soon took possession of Max also.

Duchess Alexandra and all of Max's worries were suddenly momentarily forgotten. There remained for the present nothing but the fireplace with the wood crackling cheerfully in the fire, the comfortable sofa, and in its corner an adorable red-haired girl with a bewildering capacity for talking incredible and most gratifying nonsense. And when Nancy finally discovered that it had long ago been time for her to go home, she wished good-night to Max, not

with one, but with several kisses. In fact, with a great many kisses. For Max seemed to have forgotten suddenly his former inhibition against kissing another woman while he was kissing daily Duchess Alexandra. He covered with kisses Nancy's face, hair, throat, shoulders, and hands. He pressed her to himself and stroked her shoulders and kissed her again, and released her only when she said with a little moan:

"Really, how mean of you, darling, to chase me out of your place so late at night. I'd much rather stay here."

A feeling of sudden warmth arose in Max's heart, but for some reason he also felt frightened. He chuckled with embarrassment, kissed gently the palms of her hands, but did not seem to have heard her remark. All he said was:

"Good-night, darling. I cannot tell you how grateful I am to you. I haven't had such a pleasant evening for a long, long time. I hope you'll come again soon."

"Of course I shall, old dear. I too had such a wonderful time. And now be a good boy and don't worry yourself to death over your duchess, and do call me up whenever you feel blue and need to be cheered up."

They kissed again, right on the lips, and smiled

happily. Each of them seemed to want to say something, but neither of them said a word. They only smiled again, shook their heads, and at last Nancy turned around and ran quickly down the stairs. Max wanted to follow her, but it was too late. He could hear Nancy slam the door. He grinned at the thought that to-morrow some tenant would probably complain to the landlady that the guests of that Russian artist upstairs leave late in the night and make such a noise that they awaken the whole house. For some reason it struck Max as very funny, and he began to pace his studio, humming:

"Another little drink,
Another little drink
Won't do us any harm."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHRISTMAS WAS ALREADY IN THE AIR. THE New York hoboes were mobilized to represent that one-time glorious personage, Santa Claus. They were assisted in their noble efforts to obstruct traffic by gentlemen in quasi-military uniforms and girls in round bonnets who blew into trumpets and sang hymns to the tunes of vaudeville songs. Red kettles of dangerously suggestive form hung on tripods next to placards inviting passers-by to contribute to somebody's Christmas dinner.

Max liked the unconscious humor of those attributes of New York Christmas. They seemed to him

extraordinarily funny and adorable in their childish incongruity. He also liked to watch the crowd of angry shoppers, suffocated by one another and by their innumerable packages. This self-imposed martyrdom, for the only reason of giving and receiving proverbially useless Christmas presents, was as touchingly ridiculous as a hobo impersonating Santa Claus. In some unaccountable manner all of it accentuated the holiday spirit. It also gave New York some special *couleur locale* it did not possess at other times of the year.

Max had warned Alexandra that he would call on her later than usual. He felt a sudden urge to imitate the natives and buy a lot of Christmas presents. The very satisfactory condition of his bank account was perhaps another reason for this desire. It gave Max satisfaction to know that for once he had enough money to spend some of it on others.

What puzzled him most was to whom he should make the presents. The first list he made up in his mind contained almost the whole Russian colony and a good half of native New Yorkers. But soon his list began to shrink. His money would not suffice to make decent enough presents to his wealthy American friends. It was better to send a Christmas card to a rich person than buy a present in a Five-and-Ten store. As for the Russians, Max suddenly remem-

bered that most of them had become his enemies. No, he was not going to buy presents for anybody, except for people who, he was certain, would appreciate them.

Of course he had to buy something for Alexandra. But although Alexandra had seen as much misery as anyone could, and still didn't have a cent of her own, her tastes remained those of a duchess. Nor was she very appreciative in such matters. Max had seen her make fun of humble presents some of the Russians had sent her. She laughed herself to tears at what she called "this junk." Evidently she didn't believe in the old Russian saying: "Not your present do I value, but your love." Yes, after all, what was the real value of a present if not the love it signified? But did Alexandra care much about love anyway? Max knew of only one thing which he could afford and at which Alexandra would not laugh. She had a veritable mania for perfume. Yes, he was going to buy her perfume, and he did. But this was quickly done. Also Max knew that Alexandra would not laugh at his present, but wouldn't show much enthusiasm about it either. Miss Jones was furnishing her with perfume by the gallon. Somehow, he felt only mild pleasure buying Alexandra's present. No, that didn't give him any fun at all. For whom else could he buy a present?

Suddenly Max dropped his monocle. Was he getting quite stupid? For whom should he buy a present? For Nancy, of course. Ah, yes, that Nancy was a grateful thing, always pleased with everything; to use her own expression, she was a "good brick." A lovely person indeed. Besides, Max knew what would give her pleasure. She had told him several times that she liked nothing so much as beautiful lingerie. Her only complaint against poverty was that she could afford so little of it. Max hurried to the ladies' department.

It proved to be quite an exciting adventure. Max was waited on by a very nice young lady who took full advantage of the opportunity for an animated conversation offered by the process of selling transparent chemises to a handsome young man with a monocle. Besides, the young man proved to be a liberal and understanding customer. Max proceeded further to the perfume counter. He selected the perfume with even greater care than he had for Alexandra. He knew that Nancy would appreciate it more. He also found a lovely hat which just begged to be bought, a bag, and two pairs of gloves. He thought that this would be enough, but on his way out he couldn't resist buying a manicure set, a vanity box, and a fancy lipstick. He carried all his purchases home and hid them carefully in a closet.

Max was pleased with his purchases, but he felt unusually tired. It was a wet day, and he was shivering. He felt apprehensively the approach of a headache. Max was afraid of headaches. He suffered periodically from very bad attacks. He knew that the only way to stop it would be for him to take some medicine and lie down for an hour or two. But this was quite impossible. He had to go to Alexandra. She had been quite displeased when he told her that he was going to be late. She had probably agreed to this only because she must have guessed that he was going to buy her a Christmas present. But she would certainly be terribly mad if he were not to call on her at all. Besides, she made him understand that she wanted to discuss some important matter with him. This was annoying. Probably she had some foolish new idea of reconstructing Russia. It was always a bore, but it could become insupportable when combined with a headache. Max swallowed two aspirins, took a whole box of them in his pocket, and started with a sigh on his way to Miss Jones's house.

Alexandra greeted him with a kiss, but Max saw at once that she was nervous. He also felt that his headache was growing by the minute, in spite of the aspirin. For half an hour they led a peaceful conversation on insignificant subjects. Then Alexandra went to her writing desk and returned to Max with

a letter in her hand. She gave it to him with a little smile.

"Read it," she said.

The letter was written in German. It came from Fräulein Mathilda Schmidt, some German woman whom Alexandra had known in Berlin. For some reason Alexandra had a very high regard for Fräulein Schmidt. But as far as he could judge from her letters, Max thought that Fräulein Schmidt was a rather foolish "coffee aunt," as the Germans call old gossipy women. Max began to read, and with every word he read he felt his headache increase. Mathilda Schmidt was informing Her Imperial Highness that she was happy to have definitely established that Mr. Rosenkranz had died in 1925 in a suburb of Dresden. Followed a long story of the circumstances of Mr. Rosenkranz's timely demise. It transpired that the unfortunate gentleman had been hit on the head by an iron sign of a drug store. It seemed to be a bad joke on Mr. Rosenkranz. Indeed, what could be more exasperating than to be killed by a drug-store sign? It further transpired that Mr. Rosenkranz did not die at once, but had suffered for days until his broken skull definitely gave way, and his tortured soul departed to join his ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Fräulein Schmidt had collected all the official data on the subject and was forwarding them

to Alexandra's lawyer. Max had never thought that the death of Mr. Rosenkranz could cause him such anguish. He returned the letter to Alexandra without saying a word.

"Aren't you happy?" asked Alexandra, her cheeks aglow.

"Yes, of course. You must pardon me, darling, but I have a terrible headache to-day."

Alexandra expressed her deepest sympathy and arranged cushions under his head. She was solicitousness itself. But as soon as she decided that Max was sufficiently comfortable she curled herself at his side and said:

"My Max must be very, very happy. It looks as if he has won his princess after all. Max, I really don't know whether you deserve so much luck."

Max felt a temptation to say that he wasn't so sure of it himself, but he only sighed.

"What is it, dear? Is your headache really so bad?"

"It is, my little kitten. It's simply infernal."

"My poor boy. You must lie down on my bed. But of course. Aren't we soon to be husband and wife?"

"You are adorable, but really I think I'd better sit. I might fall asleep if I lie down. God knows what it is, but I do feel rotten."

"Try to forget it. Better think how tremendously happy you are going to be soon. Oh, very soon now."

"I know." Max suppressed a sigh. "But, dear, there always remains that matter of your litigation. You cannot win it if you are going to marry a commoner."

Alexandra cast at him a suspicious glance from the corner of her eyes.

"I really think at times that you are not at all as anxious to marry me as you pretend," she said dryly.

Max felt a rising anger. As he pretended? When on earth had he pretended that he was anxious to marry her? But all he said was:

"Let's not quarrel."

"How nice," she chuckled sarcastically. "Of course you don't want to quarrel. You have made a duchess everything but your mistress. Perhaps you hope to make her even that. You certainly made her as good as your servant. Soon you'll tell me to polish your shoes. I've really seen nothing like it in my life. And you seem to be quite content. Indeed, why should you marry? An imperial highness was foolish enough to believe your assurances of love and gave you almost everything without making you marry her. You see no more reason for marriage. Well, it's just as you say. You are free. I have humiliated myself enough as it is. I'm not going to stand on my knees before a commoner begging him to marry me. Not even if you would take me by force. I'd be less

ashamed to bear my disgrace alone rather than to become your wife."

Max tried to interrupt her, to calm her; he even made some feeble assurances of love, but all of it made matters only worse. Alexandra exploded with a most offensive speech. She accused him of having done to her things which he was quite incapable of doing. She described to him cynically the physical discomfort she experienced from being kissed by a man without being loved by him fully. Max could no longer understand whether his crime consisted in having been too intimate with Alexandra or not enough so. She raged and shrieked as she had never done before. Her face, contorted with anger, lost every trace of beauty. Her eyes were rolling as those of a maniac. Surely Ivan the Terrible could not be more frightening than Alexandra was at that moment.

Max made no attempt to answer. He felt completely crushed. The pain in his head was steadily increasing. It spread to his neck and to all the joints of his body. He only waited for Alexandra to order him to leave her. He was resolved this time to take her at her word. But to his astonishment Alexandra continued to rage, but would not tell him to go home.

How long this scene lasted Max didn't know. He finally ceased even to listen. Little by little Alexan-

dra began to calm down. She started walking up and down the room, turned on the radio, asked Max some casual questions. Max looked at her with astonishment. Was the storm over? Apparently it was. For half an hour Alexandra sat silently in an armchair. Then she tried to engage Max in a conversation. Max felt disgusted. He gave monosyllabic answers without caring much whether they corresponded to her questions. He almost hoped that this would provoke her into a new outburst of anger and that she would finally order him to go away. But to his amazement Alexandra began to smile. She got up from her armchair and came over to Max's sofa. She seated herself at his side and leaned her head against his shoulder.

"You aren't really angry?" she asked with her sweetest smile.

"I'm not exactly pleased," he answered coldly.

Alexandra began to stroke his arm, looking him beseechingly in the eyes.

"Oh, but you mustn't be angry," she said pitifully. "You know what a temper I have. I just can't control it. Besides, I really don't know why you should mind our quarrels so much. After all, it merely shows my high regard for you. You know yourself that the higher a man's position at court, the more trouble he has with the emperor. Who was bawled out oftener by my late uncle than his minis-

ter of the court? But he also was my uncle's closest adviser."

"I've never solicited any such fool's job as that of the minister of the court," retorted Max.

"Oh." Alexandra looked at him inquiringly, but without anger. "You are a strange person," she said.

"I probably am."

"In fact I begin to have my doubts whether I should make you my prime minister, as I originally planned."

Max chuckled but didn't answer.

"I am afraid you are too independent," she said.

"Very likely."

"I begin to fear that were I to make you a prime minister you'd grab all power to yourself."

"I possibly would."

"You have been demoralized by this country. You seem to forget the kind of relation which should exist between a sovereign and a subject. What puzzles me, however, is why, then, are you doing anything for me at all?"

"That is a surprising question. I thought that you knew that I am much devoted to you."

Alexandra threw back her head and began to laugh.

"All this is very nice, but you certainly would not be spending all of your time on me out of mere devo-

tion. You don't think that I am as much of a child as to believe that. I thought until now that you were trying through me to become the head of the Russian government. But this last time you behave in such a strange way. I think, at times, that you either don't believe in my chances of becoming an empress, or, more likely still, are building up an organization of your own. You hope that I shall put you in control of everything, and then with your own organization will overthrow your own government and incarcerate me in some convent. I really wouldn't be at all surprised if you were planning such a thing. You'd be quite capable of that."

"I am afraid you consider me more clever than I really am."

"That is possible, too. In fact, at times I think that you are not clever at all, that you have no real ambition, nor ability, but are simply blinded by the honor of being so close to an imperial highness. You must feel very proud that the papers never mention my name without mentioning yours. However, whether you are after power or merely after the honor of being in my attendance, you really should be less independent. For in both cases you must keep my good graces."

"But suppose that whatever I am doing for you, I am doing only out of friendship, and suppose I see

that you are taking the wrong course. Is it not my duty to be independent and to help you get on the right course again instead of merely trying to preserve your good graces?"

Alexandra looked at him suspiciously.

"I can't really believe that you are serving me just out of friendship. You are too practical a person to do that. I can't conceive of your doing something without some ulterior motive. My first thought when you came to me was that you were after my money. But I must admit that you have convinced me since that you really don't care for my money. Then it must be either a desire for power or just for personal glory. At any rate, I hope that this is the case. Never would I trust myself to a man who would serve me out of personal devotion."

"What?" In spite of his headache Max straightened himself on the sofa and looked at Alexandra in amazement. "You would not trust a man who would serve you out of personal devotion?"

"Of course not."

"I am afraid that I can't understand you. I suppose you are trying to be sarcastic, or something, but I miss the point."

"I am not trying to be sarcastic." Indeed Alexandra's face was quite serious, even a little sad. "I don't see why you should be so astonished. You ought to

know yourself that it has ever been the policy of the Russian emperors to surround themselves with people who had some ulterior motive in serving them."

"No, I assure you, I never knew anything like that before. I still am unable to believe that you are saying all this in earnest. But if you are, could you explain to me the reason for that mysterious policy?"

"Nothing mysterious about it. It is on the contrary quite logical. If a person is merely devoted to you personally, you can never know when such devotion might cease. Devotion is a matter of moods. But you can't build an empire on moods. To-day a man is devoted to you, and to-morrow he goes over to your worst enemy. Furthermore, the personally devoted servants always take the point of view you have mentioned: they think it their duty and their right to do their own thinking. They are going to help their master to stay on the right course, if you please. Accordingly they permit themselves to be independent. Thank you kindly for such people in your cabinet. A sovereign doesn't want his ministers to teach him, but to take his orders. Just as you wouldn't like your butler to tell you how you should decorate your apartment, or what tie you should wear. Finally, if a man serves you disinterestedly, you owe certain gratitude to him. He works for you, but he doesn't want your money; he doesn't want

any honors, yet he must be rewarded in some way. He himself expects gratitude. Well, that is very awkward for a sovereign. A ruler can't afford to be hampered in his relations with his subjects, especially with his assistants, by any debts of gratitude. He must be free to kick out at any time, or punish in any way, incapable or dishonest officials, without getting himself accused of ingratitude. None of those troubles exist with a man who serves you out of some ulterior motive. First of all, you owe him nothing. You are quit with him by giving him money or decorations or whatever he is after. Second, he is not going to annoy you with his own thinking or give you unsolicited lessons on how to keep on the right course. His aim is to get something out of you, and for that he must please you; he doesn't care about the rest. Finally, he is entirely in your power. You can order a man like that to stand on his head, and he is going to do it. Well, you can rely on such a man, can't you? No, believe me, no sensible sovereign has yet put any trust into personal devotion."

"My Lord!" exclaimed Max, "but this is terrible, what you are saying. I know that you could not have invented such a dreadful doctrine yourself. I also acknowledge the perfect logic of your reasoning. But it is a pathological logic, I assure you. It is cynical in the extreme. Political creeds like these must have

been inherited through the centuries from ancient Byzantium. Only the Byzantine with his brilliant and yet perverted and malicious mind could have invented such a thing."

"I don't know who invented it. But I see nothing wrong about it. You admit that it is logical, and I am telling you that such has always been the policy of absolute monarchs. Of course, you, being a commoner, may not understand considerations which are obvious to me."

"But can't you see how profoundly immoral this theory is?" exclaimed Max. "And not only is it immoral, it is anachronistic. We are not in Byzantium, and this is the Twentieth Century."

"The principles of government, especially the principles of monarchical government, remain the same through all ages," Alexandra said proudly. "An emperor, anointed by God to rule his people, bears the same responsibilities and naturally follows the same principles regardless of the century he lives in. And if he is a real emperor he is not going to be swayed from performing his duty by the inability of his subjects to understand him. They don't have to understand him, and he doesn't have to make any explanations to them. An emperor is responsible to God alone."

"All of which is lovely in theory. But did the revolution teach you nothing?"

"What could a revolution teach one? A rebellion of the rabble is always possible. That has nothing to do with the principles of government."

"Perhaps not, but the extent and the results of such rebellion might have something to do with the principles of the government. For instance, you have just explained to me something that has always puzzled me all these ten years. I could never understand how it was possible that in 1917 the Emperor found himself so completely abandoned. Government officials and courtiers alike were running away from the Court, like rats from a sinking ship. There remained only a small handful of men who were willing to die with their sovereigns—half a dozen people out of the thousands and thousands who formed their entourage and their administration. Those few I shall always respect, but even then I must say that it is a rather passive service, to share one's master's death. But there wasn't a single man, not one, who would be both loyal and capable enough to save the sovereigns and to save the country. I was terrified by such mass disloyalty and incapacity. There was a time when I was ashamed of being a Russian. But now you have absolved the Russian people in my eyes from all guilt. If it was the Emperor's policy to surround him-

self with bad lackeys, nothing else could have happened but what actually did happen. The few people who died with him were apparently kept at court through misunderstanding. Their majesties must not have discovered that those few were at least honest. As you say, your reasoning is very logical, but it holds good only as long as you are in power. What it amounts to is that you should surround yourself not with loyal servants but with bad lackeys and court jesters. Yes, you can keep them in complete obedience as long as you have the power of giving them the money or the honors they are after. But the moment that you lose your power, you lose also your lackeys and your jesters. You remain alone. This should be self-evident even to you, and this is what actually happened to your uncle, our late Emperor, ten years ago."

Alexandra looked at Max pensively and then shook her head.

"No," she said. "You are quite wrong. It is your logic which is perverted. I repeat that you cannot rule an empire without being assured of complete obedience on the part of all your subjects. Loyalty, personal devotion, all you are saying, are mere words, but they mean nothing in real life. The type of people you extol, for all their personal devotion, are more dangerous for a monarch than avowed revolu-

tionaries ever could be. As for my late uncle, the Emperor, you are quite mistaken. I have the highest respect for him, in a way I worship him, but I cannot be blind to the fact that he perished through his own fault. He was weak, he was lenient. He wasn't fit to be an emperor." Alexandra's eyes suddenly lighted with anger. "If instead of sending people to Siberia, he had been shooting them, shooting them, not by the hundred, but by the thousand, by scores of thousands, if necessary, there would have been no revolution in Russia! There was no revolution under Ivan the Terrible or under Peter the Great. Why? Because neither of them hesitated to kill people whenever necessary. Peter the Great had his own son killed. He did well. I would have done likewise!"

Max sighed and began to examine his monocle.

"It is quite true that Peter the Great had his son killed," he said after a while. "But it is also true that he was a genius. Perhaps this last fact had more to do with the success of his rule than the first. Also, he had never recovered from the shock which the execution of his son had caused him. His own death, soon afterward, was almost suicidal. But then this is of course a purely academic discussion. For the present we are just two Russian refugees in New York." He tried to smile.

"So we are, for the present," Alexandra said with

an accent on the "present." "But I think that you don't know me well enough. I am more stubborn than you imagine. I am going to have my way in everything yet, and I am going to make you abide by my will." The last words she pronounced in a tone that was at once kind and threatening.

"Perhaps you also do not know me well enough," answered Max. "I also am stubborn. I don't think that you could make me abide by your decisions. You can dismiss me easily enough, but as long as you want me to have anything to do with your affairs you can rest assured that I shall use my own judgment."

"That remains to be seen. Incidentally, it isn't proper for you to make hints that you are willing to be dismissed from my service. You may be certain that I shall relieve you of your duties when I see fit. But I have rather the mind to keep you, but to make you less independent. I think I have been too lenient with you in everything. I have permitted you to lead too often. I think you are practical. But I think you easily surpass the bounds of discipline. If I can force you to obey me blindly—and I feel certain that I can do that—then you can yet become very useful and very agreeable," Alexandra concluded with a kind and patronizing smile.

"I think you are an optimist," Max answered with

a chuckle. "However, events will show whether you are right or not. But I am afraid that I must go home now, because I feel quite sick."

"That's too bad," said Alexandra. "Still a headache? Well, then, I think I'll let you go home. But be here to-morrow at two, not a minute later, or I'll bawl you out as I have never done yet." She laughed, but it was clear that she meant what she said.

"I'll be happy to be here to-morrow at two, provided I'm still able to move," said Max with a wan smile. He felt as if his head were breaking to splinters. "I hope you will forgive me for having been not very entertaining, but this head of mine——" He passed his hand over his forehead. "Well, good-night. I think I had better not kiss you to-night. I don't want you to get a cold from me."

"I am not afraid of colds, and you are going to kiss me," she said.

He did.

As always happens in such cases, Max couldn't find a single taxicab. An icy rain was coming down in a steady stream. The wind chilled him to the bones. He didn't understand, himself, how he could find enough force to move his feet. He felt as if he were already unconscious and moving by momentum only. Indeed, no sooner had he entered his studio and dragged himself to his bed than he lost consciousness.

MAX WOKE UP ON THE FOLLOWING MORNING with a very high fever. His head, neck, and every bone in his body were aching. He tried to get out of bed, but no sooner did he raise his head from the pillow than everything before his eyes turned black. He sank back.

"This is a nice little influenza," he said to himself, and turning to the wall, began to slumber.

Max slumbered for the whole day. He couldn't remember having ever been so weak and apathetic before. He didn't want to eat, he didn't want to move, he could hardly think. He just wanted to

slumber, not only for one day, but for a great many days, perhaps forever. It occurred to him that one could die from influenza, and the thought pleased him. It was very surprising even to himself, for he loved life and usually never thought of death. But now he knew that he wouldn't mind death at all.

In the afternoon he remembered that he was supposed to call on Alexandra at two, not a minute later. At first he chuckled maliciously. Well, this time Alexandra could rage as much as she wanted but he was not going to call on her at two, nor indeed at any other hour. He felt almost grateful for his illness. He knew that under no other circumstances would he have missed that appointment. It was a relief for once to disobey Alexandra. But that malicious joy didn't last long. Little by little in his memory arose all the many incidents in which Alexandra had shown to him so much kindness, so much confidence, that he was often moved almost to tears. The angry Alexandra, the vulgar Alexandra, the sulking Alexandra disappeared. Now he could think of her only as of his beautiful Madonna with the soft brown eyes, his duchess of the chaste forehead chiseled of white marble, his little kitten, that tender, helpless, and infinitely lovable child. But that enchanting picture depressed him the more. He wondered how he could ever have quarreled with

her; he felt that he and he alone was guilty of all the unpleasantnesses and quarrels that had ever occurred between him and Alexandra. He wanted to go to her at once and tell her that he worshiped her, that he adored her, that he would never disobey her or displease her again. He began to be tortured with remorses. What tortured him most of all was that he had even permitted himself to criticize Alexandra to a stranger, Miss Nancy Callaway. That conversation he had had with Miss Callaway about Alexandra suddenly appeared to him as an unforgivable crime, as a desecration of his sanctuary. He wondered how this could ever have happened, and gradually he began to remember how it did happen. It was Alexandra with her sulking, with her fits of anger, with her vulgarities who had driven him into such despair that he simply had had to unburden his mind, to seek advice. Yes, Alexandra herself had caused him to desecrate the temple he had erected to her. And when he had realized that, he felt nothing more than an overwhelming pity for himself, for Alexandra, and for the beautiful feeling that he had had for her. And he thought that he could see Alexandra smiling at him sadly, and that he could hear himself repeat in a plaintive voice: "Why did you do it, Alexandra?" Then again he remembered that he had to call on her at two o'clock, not a minute later, and

a sudden fear seized him. He knew that he had to make it at all cost. He started to dress, he rushed to the door—but no, that was only a dream, he was still lying in bed, and twilight began to creep into his room. It was already much later than two o'clock. Immediately a question arose in his mind. Wasn't Alexandra going to try and find out why he didn't come? She could see, yesterday, that he was quite sick. She knew that he would never have missed his appointment with her unless he was sick. Didn't it worry her in the least? And for fully an hour he stared at the telephone, hoping frantically that it would ring and that Miss Jones's secretary would inquire whether he wasn't sick. But the telephone remained silent, and every minute increased in Max a feeling of reproach toward Alexandra. He thought how he himself was always worried over Alexandra's slightest indisposition. She found it natural, she expected him to sit for hours at the foot of her bed if she felt at all unwell, and watch over her sleep. She would sulk for hours if he would omit to inquire about her health, even when she was perfectly well. But now that he fell ill, gravely ill, Alexandra didn't consider it necessary even to have the secretary call him up. Probably she wasn't perturbed in the least. And what if he were to die? Surely she wouldn't drop a tear. But if her dog Jimmy should die, why

then she would weep for weeks. She had been quite ill for several days when Jimmy's nose had seemed to her too warm and she had feared that he had pneumonia. No, but this wasn't possible. Alexandra had to telephone. And he waited and waited, but in vain.

And again he began to reproach Alexandra and then himself. Perhaps she was right that he had behaved toward her like a cad. Perhaps he was no better than Mr. Rosenkranz, who had taken advantage of her helplessness in such a dreadful manner. After all, he did kiss her, although he never intended to marry her. But then didn't she herself respond to his kisses, and often even provoke them, long before she ever began to talk about marrying him? Oh, he couldn't unravel all that. He only knew that all this was a terrible mess, worse than what he had ever experienced before. He had suffered enough in his life, but never had he suffered the humiliation of having anybody, and above all himself, question the fact that he remained under all circumstances a gentleman. No, it was a tangle which could not be solved. It was a Gordian knot, if there ever was one. And a Gordian knot could not be untied, it could only be cut. Perhaps God would be merciful enough and cut this tie by letting him die. But this time the thought of death no longer left him indifferent. It made him realize how desperately lonesome he was.

To-morrow would be Christmas Eve, a day when even the last beggar received some attention. But nobody paid the slightest attention to Max. Here he was, all alone, ill, perhaps dying, and there wasn't a soul in the whole wide world that would care about him, or even inquire about his health. Now he felt as a little and bitterly offended child. His lips trembled, his eyes became wet, and all his thoughts and emotions were overshadowed by an irresistible longing for a smile, a caress, some manifestation of tenderness, no matter from whom. No, he really didn't mind dying, but he wanted to see somebody smile at him before he was to leave this earth.

It became darker and darker in the room, until Max knew that it was night. He dimly realized that it had been dark for quite some time now. Very likely it was already midnight. His dozing turned into sleep, but sleep brought him nothing but nightmares. Not the kind of nightmares in which one is haunted by some fantastic monster, or rolls down into a precipice, or finds one's self in some other mortal danger. No, the dreams of that night were less frightening but in a way the more torturesome.

Alexandra . . . Yes, no matter what other images passed through Max's mind, in the background there always remained Alexandra. She was in the background, and yet she overshadowed everything else.

Alexandra! Alexandra! He had to explain something to her. He had to give her some urgent warning. He had just passed over Moscow. How? He didn't know. Perhaps he had flown over Moscow in an airplane. Probably so, because he had seen clearly the innumerable turrets of the Kremlin, the glittering domes of the cathedrals. And beneath it all he had seen an angry and ugly mob, a grumbling mob, a monstrous mob. He knew that he had to keep this mob in check. . . .

But why Moscow? He had not visited Moscow often. But was he in Moscow? No, it was St. Petersburg. Now he could clearly see the spire of the Admiralty, the equestrian statue of Peter the Great, the solemn and somber Winter Palace. But here too there was a mob, the same menacing, threatening mob. He had to reach Alexandra in time. She was in Tsarskoe Selo. But she wasn't just a duchess: she was the Empress. Max had to see her, but there he was, right in her presence. "Alexandra," he pleaded, "you must remove Rasputin—you must! These people are coming, they are quite near, they'll kill you. Alexandra, for your own sake you must remove Rasputin." But Alexandra would not answer. She was sulking. She was angry at Max because he was five minutes late for his appointment. She stared over his head with her eyes of glass. "Alexandra!" he pleaded.

"You must remove Rasputin—you must! They're coming, they'll murder you!"—"No, no," she answered at last. "You were five minutes late." Cold perspiration covered Max's forehead. He had to do something to save Alexandra from that mob. With a terrible effort he opened his eyes.

For a few minutes Max was looking at the familiar walls of his room.

"How absurd," he said to himself. "I am in New York, and Rasputin is dead long ago. Alexandra can't remove him any more. No, there was something else I had to tell her. . . ."

And the walls of his room disappeared. Again there was Alexandra, and again there was the mob. Max couldn't see it, but he heard its angry shouting. "Alexandra," he began to plead anew, "you must compromise with Aunt Mavrikia. Yes, you must. And you must be nice to Mr. Marshal. He could save you." But she kept staring into space. "No, no," she said. "Mr. Marshal always sits on his head."—"Oh, Alexandra!" And suddenly Max saw that it wasn't just Alexandra, but the whole imperial family, and he knew that he had to save them, but he could do nothing because Alexandra insisted that Max was five minutes late for his appointment. A sudden rage seized him. "All right, perish, then, if you wish," he shouted. "But do you forget that you

are the Empress of Russia? Do you forget that you hold in your hands the fate of one hundred and eighty million people? You must do something, you must stop that mob. They'll drown the country in blood, they'll sweep it with fire. You will be responsible for that!"—"No, no," said Alexandra. "You were five minutes late. Mr. Marshal is sitting on his head. . . ."

Again Max forced himself to open his eyes. Yes, he was in his apartment in New York—he knew that—and yet he could no longer feel quite safe, even here. Strange noises were buzzing in his ears. Was it the angry mob ready to attack the Palace? No, no, there was no mob—he was in New York. . . . He tried to forget Russia, to forget Alexandra, but he couldn't. His thoughts became more normal, but they all revolved around the Imperial Palace and the events of the revolution. And in some inexplainable manner the sight of the Palace was no longer pleasant to him. It too belonged to his nightmare. So did the Emperor; so did the Empress. . . .

Yes, now he could see all of them, but these faces that he had always adored were now terrifying in their obstinate calm. They all stared over his head with those eyes of glass of a sulking Alexandra. They nodded exasperatingly with their heads, like so many Chinese idols. They all repeated: "No, no, you were

five minutes late. Mr. Marshal is sitting on his head. Mrs. Rippencloth gave me her left hand. We don't want any personal devotion. You must obey. You were five minutes late."—"Well, what of it, what of it?" Max began to shout. "Suppose I was an hour late, suppose Mrs. Rippencloth gave you her left foot. You must do something! Can't you see that the Empire is crumbling? Can't you see that in another moment the country's rivers will be red with blood? You must do something! You are responsible for the lives of these one hundred and eighty million people. You are responsible for all these women and children who will be murdered, raped, unless you do something. You must remove Rasputin!"—"No, no," said Alexandra. "You were five minutes late."

And again Max made a terrific effort and woke up. And this torture continued hour after hour, and the time crept so slowly that every hour seemed to stretch into a whole year, into many years, into a lifetime, into Max's lifetime. Absurd pictures created by his feverish imagination mixed with real memories and bits of sober reasoning. Every minute Max seemed to go anew through all the horrors of the revolution. But in his feverish phantasms as well as in his conscious thoughts these horrors no longer came from that dreaded monster, the revolutionary mob. That mob, which he used to blame for every-

thing, now appeared to him as impersonal and unconscious of its own monstrosity as a hurricane or an earthquake. He could no longer hate it. What he began to hate were these cold, obstinate faces, the eyes of glass, the Emperor, the Empress, the grand dukes and grand duchesses. He saw them all as he had known them in Russia, and yet in each of them he saw Alexandra. Yes, they all had her stern eyes, her red spots, her sulking brow. They all refused to listen to reason, they all refused to move a finger. They were willing to let the whole country perish because he, Max, was five minutes late for his appointment and because Mr. Marshal was sitting on his head. And Max no longer knew whether he still adored them and wanted to rescue them, or whether he hated them and would let the mob murder them.

Yes, now he knew that he hated them. They, not the revolutionaries, had caused him all the suffering of the last ten years, they had ruined all those unfortunate Russians who were now leading a miserable existence in the slums of all foreign cities, and the even more unfortunate Russians who were still in Russia, suffering from the tyranny of an absurd and cruel government. Yes, they did it all with their heartlessness and obstinacy, their petty arrogance, their Byzantine maliciousness. How had Max never realized it before? How could he have worshiped

those tragic and yet ridiculous figures to whom the fate of millions of people was less important than the manner in which members of their entourage were sitting or shaking hands? And yet every accusation that he made against them filled Max with mortal anguish. Could it be that his gods were but idols of clay? Could it be that all the beauty and charm of his beloved past was as unreal as the setting of a theatrical show? But then, what did he care about the past? The past was gone. The Russian Empire lay in ashes. There wasn't even a tombstone to mark the place of the Emperor's burial. Nor had he been buried. They took him and his whole family into a forest and burned their bodies on a pyre. But they did not burn Alexandra and Max. . . .

Through his mind passed one after another pictures from his childhood. He saw himself again on the emerald lawns of the imperial parks, on the sunny shores of the Black Sea, among the quiet pines of Finland. And everywhere there was Alexandra, the cheerful, mischievous little Alexandra, her face enframed in the brown waves of her silky hair, a big white ribbon on top of her head, like a big butterfly, ready at any moment to fly away toward the blue sky above. Alexandra's radiant eyes, her musical voice, her little hands carved of transparent marble . . . Oh, how he had adored her, how tenderly he

had loved her, how miserable he had been all these years without her. He had never realized all this, before the day when he stood again before Alexandra, holding her frail hand, looking admiringly into her beautiful soft brown eyes. Could it be that this had happened less than four months ago? It wasn't possible. Years, decades separated him from that day when his whole being filled with boundless happiness of having again found his fairy princess, his czaritza, his beloved little Alexandra. . . .

But what had become of her now? Whither had she disappeared? Whence had suddenly emerged that exasperating, tiresome duchess who flew into fits of insane rage at the slightest provocation, whose beautiful lips could pronounce the grossest vulgarities, who consoled herself with absurd plans of conquering Russia, and who cynically played with love because she wanted to exchange the name of Mrs. Rosenkranz for that of Baroness von Waldenscherna? But did this unfortunate and unattractive duchess really exist? At times it seemed to Max that this pitiful figure was but another product of his nightmares. Gathering all his mental forces, he tried to chase her away, to convince himself that she had never existed, to replace her by the adorable Alexandra of his childhood, by his little kitten, by his Madonna of a few weeks ago. But it was in vain. . . .

Max rolled on his bed like a sick child and, as it seemed to him, cried: "Oh, Alexandra, oh, my little kitten, my czaritza, my Madonna, what did you do to me, what did you do to yourself, what did you do to our love? Oh, Alexandra, is there any heart in you, can you not forget that you are a duchess, can you not give up all your petty vanity, your false pride, your malice and arrogance? Oh, Alexandra, can you not be just a human being, can you not see the beauty of human love, do you have to trample on my heart, do you have to make me hate the one whom I loved so tenderly and so purely, hate myself for abandoning you, you whom I loved more than life itself?"

He thought that he was pleading with Alexandra aloud, but in reality he was only emitting suppressed moans, as sick people are wont to do. Then gradually his nightmares began to subside. Perhaps his fever grew less. Little by little his normal self began to return to him. When the pale light of the morning dawn began slowly to invade his room, Max's brain was perfectly clear. For a moment he saw in his mind again the image of Alexandra, but he dismissed it with a curt remark: "The unfortunate woman. But after all, what do I care?" He even lifted his right eyebrow as if to drop his monocle. At the moment he was hardly conscious of the dull blow that fell on his heart. He knew only that he

had an unpleasant taste in his mouth and that it became difficult for him to breathe. But he preferred to think that this unpleasant sensation was caused by his illness. Influenza did affect people that way. . . . And, anyway, he was too exhausted to be able to think much. Absent-mindedly he reached again for his monocle, chuckled as he remembered that it wasn't in his eye but lay peacefully on the night table, yawned, turned with his face to the wall, and almost immediately fell asleep.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MAX HAD SLEPT WELL AND FELT MUCH refreshed. But he was afraid to open his eyes and find himself in his solitary room. He also remembered that it was Christmas Eve. His solitude became the more depressing. But as he lay with closed eyes a pleasant aroma of boiling coffee suddenly filled his nostrils. This astonished him, but he felt too weak and lazy to search for an explanation. Nevertheless, he was pleased. He tried to think that he was on his estate in Finland, among his family, and that downstairs they were boiling coffee for him, according to his favorite recipe inherited from his Swedish great-great-grandmother. Fever made it easier for Max to

believe in the reality of his phantasms. Soon he hypnotized himself into actually hearing steps approaching his bed. He heard distinctly the sounds of a tray being placed on his night table. The smell of coffee and of fresh bread became quite real. Then somebody touched gently his arm. Max opened his eyes and saw Nancy. He was so astonished that he wanted to close his eyes again. Obviously he was still asleep, but Nancy patted him on the cheek and exclaimed:

"Hurrah, he is still alive!"

Max smiled and rubbed his eyes.

"I can't understand a thing," he said. "Where do you come from?"

"Now what do you think, where do I come from? From China, of course."

"Ha-ha, now you have to talk nonsense, haven't you? You know what I mean. How did you get here?"

"Occasionally I get to places by walking on my legs—that's what I've done this morning. You wouldn't remember, of course, that we had an appointment for this morning. I was supposed to pose."

"On Christmas Eve?"

"Well, you know those damn capitalists, they'll squeeze the last drop of blood out of a poor working girl like me."

"But where did you get this coffee from?"

"From your pantry, my angel. I do see that you are sick. Your brain just refuses to function. But tell me—what's happened to you?"

"Oh, just a bad cold—influenza, I suppose. But do you mean to say you've boiled that coffee for me and bought that bread and everything?"

"No, darling, the percolator did the boiling. Now, stop asking foolish questions and do eat. You look starved. How long have you been lying here?"

"Oh, just a day." Max couldn't turn his eyes away from Nancy's beaming face. Her lustrous red hair, her kind hazel eyes, the dimple on her chin, every freckle on her face were smiling at him enchantingly. After his solitude and misery of the last thirty-six hours this smile gave to Max a feeling similar to the one he had in early spring when he felt for the first time penetrated by warm and loving rays of the awakened sun. He felt everything in him gradually penetrated by this smile. An overwhelming satisfaction mixed with gratitude overcame him. He silently took Nancy's hands and began to kiss with tender little kisses her finger tips, her nails, and the skin between her fingers.

"Now what's this orgy?" asked Nancy in a low, gentle voice, seating herself on the edge of his bed.

"You come to me like an angel from heaven," said Max.

"I always knew I was sort of angelic—but, dear, my fingers aren't so nourishing. Do drink your coffee and eat your rolls. You can keep me for the dessert."

"I just can't grasp it. That you should have come here and cooked this breakfast for me . . ." Max blushed, for he felt that his eyes became moist. That was foolish, but after all, he was sick. "I felt so lonesome, so abandoned, but you——" What was the matter with him? Now his voice began to tremble, and he hurriedly bowed his head and began again to kiss her hands, to hide his embarrassment.

Nancy gently stroked his hair.

"You are an old dear," she said, and her voice was not very steady, either. "But do drink your coffee, darling. It'll get cold."

Max obeyed. Never had coffee tasted so good to him. He felt as if every spoonful of it were returning him to life, giving him new force, as if it were some invigorating, magic elixir.

"Ah," he sighed with satisfaction, after finishing his coffee, "that was delightful. You know I didn't eat anything for the whole day yesterday, and I haven't tasted such delicious coffee in a long time. And now, if you want to complete your benefaction, I would ask you for another favor."

"What is it, dear?"

"I must send a letter to Duchess Alexandra. She doesn't know what's happened to me. I must tell her that I am sick and cannot call on her for some time. Besides, she's going to have a conference with her lawyer the day after to-morrow, and I must explain to her how she should talk to him. But I feel a bit weak to write myself. Would you mind writing her if I dictate the letter to you?"

"I'd be glad to. What do you think of that! Now I am starting to correspond with duchesses."

As a matter of fact, Max could have forced himself to write the letter personally, but he didn't want to do it. Were he to write to Alexandra himself he would have to use all the endearing expressions he used in conversation with her, and somehow he wasn't able at the moment to think of Alexandra with any tenderness. He also felt a dim desire to exaggerate to Alexandra his illness. He would say nothing about it save that he was ill, but the very fact that he couldn't write himself, but had to dictate, should make it clear to Alexandra that he was really ill. Perhaps she would feel, if only a little, sorry for not having as much as called him up on the telephone. But above all, a dictated letter had to be quite official. It could begin in no other way but: "Your Imperial Highness," and end with: "Your obedient servant, Baron Maximilian von Waldenscherna."

Max dictated a ten-page letter. He started with apologies for not having called on her, explained that he was ill in bed and couldn't even write himself, sent her his Christmas greetings, and then gave her detailed instructions for her conference with the lawyer. When the letter was finished, Max sighed with relief. Now he was free, absolutely free for the whole time of his illness—in other words, for not less than for a week, possibly for two. In the meantime he could forget all his worries, dismiss from his mind all of Alexandra's affairs, Alexandra herself, if possible.

"Now is accomplished the duty God has entrusted me, the sinner, with," he quoted a Russian verse. "Now my soul can rest in peace, and all of it thanks to you, good old Nance. I am only worried that you might catch my cold if you sit with me much longer, although I wish you could stay for a while yet."

"Of course I shall stay," answered Nancy. "I'm not afraid of any contagion, and if I should get sick I'd expect you to take care of me."

"Under the circumstances I almost wish that you would get sick. How much longer can you stay?"

"Well, I'm not in a hurry to go anywhere. In fact, were you thoughtful enough to invite me for dinner, we could celebrate a nice Christmas Eve to-

gether. I am even willing to do the cooking if you are going to furnish the liquor."

Max even jumped on his bed from pleasure.

"Why, Nance, but this would be simply wonderful. . . . But listen, dear, you can't spend the whole Christmas Eve in a sickroom. I'm sure you planned to go to some party."

"I'm telling you we are going to have a party right here, and don't you argue. Now, give me all the money you have, and I'll run down to buy the dinner and mail your letter."

"You're wonderful, adorable, lovable, and kissable," announced Max. "I think you are the first woman I have met who is just wholly adorable and doesn't have any unpleasant characteristics at all. It is really surprising. You see, I've always admired women tremendously, but even the best of them are nine tenths angel and one tenth nuisance. But you are just ten tenths or one whole lovable!"

"What a speech! But you are a darling, Max, really. You're awfully cute in your night robe."

"Now what—the awakening of maternal instincts?"

"Probably, and my maternal instinct tells me that now you must take a nap. Yes, darling, you must sleep till the very dinner. Anyway, I couldn't talk to you while cooking, and besides, I want you fresh

and gay for our Christmas party, so don't you argue, now, but go to sleep."

Nancy pulled the blanket up to Max's chin, tucked it under his shoulder, patted him on the head, gave him a maternal kiss, and left the room. He was indeed tired and soon began to slumber. But this time Max was no longer tortured by nightmares. It was on the contrary an extraordinary sweet slumber which reminded him of his early childhood. All of his worries had evaporated. Nothing bothered him any longer, nothing seemed at all important. The whole world could fall to pieces for all he cared. He was happy, his bed was soft, his fever was diminishing. He had everything he wanted. What it was that he really wanted and that he now had Max didn't exactly know himself. But the thought that predominated in his mind was that he was no longer alone, that Nancy was soon going to come back, and that they would have a Christmas party together. This thought filled him with unusual contentment. Through his slumber he heard Nancy return and put some heavy packages on the table. Then he heard the clatter of dishes in the kitchenette, the slamming of the door of the oven. He heard her hum: "Baby face, you have the cutest little baby face." It was a foolish little song, a song that at any other time would appear to Max offensively silly. But it ac-

quired some inexplainable charm and a new meaning when sung by Nancy. Didn't she herself have the cutest little baby face? With such pleasant and lazy thoughts Max finally fell asleep, and, as Nancy had told him, slept obediently until dinner time. When he woke up he felt so much rested that he decided to give Nancy a surprise and get up. It proved more difficult than he thought. Only after getting out of bed did he realize how terribly weak he was. He could hardly stand on his legs. But he gathered all his forces, washed and shaved himself, and put on his evening dress. It was a physical torture for him to do all that, but he was determined to celebrate the party properly. When his toilette was ready, his face powdered, and his hair neatly combed and slightly perfumed, he inserted the faithful monocle in his eye. That monocle of his seemed to be a magic instrument. In some mysterious way it always helped him to brace up physically as well as morally. At last he went to the closet and pulled out all of Nancy's presents. My, that was quite a load. He put them all one on top of the other, grabbed them with both hands, and holding the top of the pile with his chin, tottered into the studio.

"Goodness gracious!" exclaimed Nancy. "Why, Max, but you're gone mad—you must stay in bed.

My heavens! You've even put your dinner jacket on. And what's all this junk you are bringing?"

But Max didn't answer at once, for he was surprised, no less than Nancy, by the transformation of his studio. The table was neatly set as for a real Christmas dinner. Four tall red candles stood in the middle, forks and knives were shining like real silver, the table was loaded with Max's favorite delicacies, including a broiled duck stuffed with apples and his celebrated *pâté de foies gras*. A fire was cheerfully crackling in the fireplace, and, most surprising of all, a little Christmas tree with electric lights stood on the small table in the corner of the room. Nor did Nancy forget to prepare the cocktails and put Max's whole supply of alcohol on the table.

"You are a real good fairy!" exclaimed Max. "My God, and to think that only yesterday I was bemoaning my sad fate because I thought that I would have a sad Christmas this year. Why, but I've never been in such a happy mood on any Christmas Eve, and all thanks to you. But do take all these things from me. You know I am not very strong on my legs yet."

Nancy rushed to free Max from his load, and he sank on an armchair.

"Uff," he said wiping off his forehead. "I'm not feeling so well. Let's first have a cocktail—that'll help me to brace up."

"And now I want to know what's in all these packages," said Nancy, after she and Max had emptied half of the cocktail shaker.

"It's all for you, darling," said Max. "Eh, but these cocktails did help me. There's nothing better for colds than alcohol, a lot of alcohol." And indeed he felt already a pleasant haze in his head and a numbness in his whole body which stilled almost completely the pain caused by his fever.

"All this for me?" exclaimed Nancy. "Why, Max, but you are a clown. . . . Now, really, what do you think of that!"

She began to unwrap one package after another, examining every object and emitting exclamations of delight.

"Oh, what beautiful perfume, perfectly delicious! . . . Oh, what a cute bag! . . . And what's this? Stockings! . . . Ha-ha-ha, Max, oh, Max, the very idea, presenting a modest young girl like me with panties. Just imagine! But they are perfectly cute, I admit, and those gloves . . ."

She threw all her presents in one heap on the sofa, ran over to Max, threw her arms around his neck, and began to smother him with kisses.

"Now, aren't you a dear!" she exclaimed between kisses. "All those lovely things . . . But you must have spent a fortune on me, you darling!"

"Eh, I'd spend ten fortunes on you if I had any, dear old Nance," said Max, kissing Nancy's hands. "But now let's eat. I'm as hungry as a wolf."

It was a real Christmas dinner Nancy had prepared. She had bought even an English Christmas pudding, to which Max had added some of his own rum, which he lighted. Nancy clapped with her hands and giggled like a little girl. After the dinner they sat together on the sofa before the fireplace.

"I've eaten so much I can hardly breathe," declared Max. "And to tell you the truth, I'm quite a bit drunk, but I do feel happy."

"Well, I too am drunk, and I too feel happy," said Nancy.

"Last night," said Max, "I felt so terribly miserable, so dreadfully lonesome. I wished nothing so much as to have somebody come and smile at me. I thought I would give my whole life for one kindly smile. Then you came. . . ."

He looked at Nancy. She sat in the corner of the sofa staring pensively at the fire. The flickering flames reflected in her luminous hazel eyes and on her golden hair. A tender smile played around the corners of her mouth. Max wondered that he had never noticed before how beautiful she was. But she wasn't merely beautiful, she was also touching in the way in which a very small child can be touching.

And she was cozy. Yes, cozy was just the right word, for her very presence gave Max an inexplainable feeling of comfort, of safety, of peace, of coziness, in short. A furtive little shadow was trembling in the dimple on her chin. Who but Nancy could have such a funny and adorable dimple on the chin? Max leaned forward and kissed Nancy on the dimple. She started, awakened from her dreams.

"You've frightened me," she said. "What's the big idea?"

"I just had to kiss the dimple on your chin, dear, it's such a lovely dimple."

"Did you ever!"

"And that freckle on the tip of your nose——"

"Now you must mention those horrid freckles of mine, mustn't you?"

"They aren't in the least horrid. They are most enchanting."

"Did anybody ever hear of enchanting freckles?"

"I did. In fact, I can see them right now."

"They are the curse of my life."

"They are one of your greatest attractions. Now you wouldn't be the dear old Nance you are if you didn't have those freckles. Do give me the tip of your nose to kiss."

"You are a clown," she retorted, but with a

charming little smirk offered to him the tip of her nose for a kiss. Max kissed it gently.

"Now, are you happy?" Nancy asked with a mischievous giggle.

"Immensely happy, dear. Much happier than I can tell." He put his arm around her shoulder and drew her to himself. "You are very lovable," he whispered.

Nancy threw back her head, half closed her eyes, and with a benign smile offered her lips. For a while they kissed in silence with the languid feline passion of an overwhelming love. Then Nancy drew a deep breath.

"I love you," said Max in a low voice.

She shook her head. "No, you don't," she answered in a whisper and again offered her lips for a kiss.

"I love you," repeated Max after a while.

"No, you don't," she repeated, but her face was beaming with quiet joy. "How could you?" she added with a puzzled expression in her hazel eyes that suddenly became unusually round.

"But I do love you," answered Max.

Nancy put her hands on his shoulders and looked him straight in the eyes.

"Darling," she said slowly, "you don't have to tell me that you love me, if you don't. You don't have to pretend to me, for I love you and I want to be yours, anyway."

"But I do love you, Nance. How can I make you believe me? Why can't you believe me? Oh, if you only knew how wonderful you are. Nance, I never can express love in words, but can't you feel yourself that I love you?"

"But why? How? I can't believe it."

"Why not?"

"Because—because it is another you love." She said it timidly, meekly, but without bitterness. "You shouldn't be angry," she added hastily. "It makes no difference to me. But you mustn't pretend to me."

"Oh, Nance, I couldn't pretend to you, even if I wanted to," answered Max. "And I know, I feel, that I don't have to pretend to you, and I love you the more for that. But, Nance, you must believe me. I love you and nobody else. I think now that I have loved you all along. Oh, I don't want to say that I didn't love Alexandra. Of course I did. I even think that you were right when you told me that one couldn't differentiate between several kinds of love. Yes, I think now that it was all a pretense on my part. I have been in love with Alexandra, or perhaps I tried to be in love with her. But you—you—oh, well, I can't explain it, and do I have to? You'll know it some day. I love you with my whole heart and with my whole body and with every particle of my soul. I do love you."

"I can't believe it," she said, or rather moaned, but her radiant eyes, her enchanted smile did not confirm her words. And again they began to kiss silently, passionately, languidly, with an almost painful concentration.

"Oh, God," moaned Nancy. "Darling, I love you. . . ."

"And I adore you, I worship you," whispered Max. "Nance, my only one, my little dove, my goddess, would—would you marry me?"

Nancy's hazel eyes became round, almost frightened. She put her hands on Max's shoulders and gently pushed him away.

"Marry you?" she asked.

Now it was Max's face which expressed fear.

"I know, I know," he said hastily. "I have no reason to expect that you should trust me, but if you could only feel—if you could only know——" He couldn't find the proper words. He only looked at her fearfully, pleadingly.

"Oh, dear, I can trust you," said Nancy. "I do trust you, I do love you. But you, how can you love or trust me? How much do you know about me? And then—and then—oh, please don't feel hurt. Yes, I begin to believe that you love me, I want to believe it, but, dear, how can you? Perhaps it is only a short infatuation that blinds you, that makes you

think that I am different from what I really am. Perhaps it is also a passing disillusionment with the Duchess. You were tired, sick. She seems to have a difficult disposition. But you may still love her. You must love her. Don't misunderstand me, it is of you I am thinking now, not of myself. But when I think how much that duchess must mean to you, how much you must have in common with her, and that you want to marry, instead of her, a woman whom you hardly know at all, who belongs to a world so different from your own, then I can't comprehend it. Suppose you do marry me and then find that you've made a fatal error. With a different kind of man I would be less afraid, but I think I have come to know you rather well, Max. You are too tender, too kind, too much of a gentleman to come to your wife and say: 'I made a mistake.' You'd feel yourself bound, and you'd suffer. Oh, Max, I love you too much to bear the thought that I might become the cause of your suffering. I really don't think you ought to marry me."

Max was gently stroking Nancy's hand.

"You are a wonder, Nancy," he said, looking at her pensively. "You really are a wonder. You have a heart of gold. I can't tell you how much I appreciate what you are saying. But you make me the more anxious to marry you. I am afraid I can't be as good

as you are. I don't know how good a husband I am going to be, though God knows I would do everything in my power to make you happy. But I am more selfish than you are, and I want to marry you, even though I feel no certainty that this would be for your good. I want to marry you because I love you, because I know that I myself am going to be infinitely happy with you. As for Alexandra, it isn't a passing disillusionment on my part. It is a dreadful disappointment the magnitude of which I shall not conceal from you, a disappointment not only in one human being, but in a whole world, in a whole philosophy of life. After all, it still is true that there was a certain abstraction in my love for Alexandra. I wonder, for instance, whether I would notice her if she were just an ordinary woman. Even when we both were children, the fact that she was a duchess, a niece of my emperor, surrounded her in my eyes with a kind of mystic aureole. My attitude toward monarchy and all its representatives was more or less that of a religious devotee. Much of that I naturally lost as I grew older, but in the last years all of it had acquired a new quality, that of infinitely dear memories. And then that cherished past suddenly returned to me miraculously in the person of Alexandra. Is there any wonder that for a short while I lost my head again? But this time the enchantment

didn't last. Only too soon did I discover that I was worshiping an empty shell that centuries ago had lost all its sense, its very right to exist. That was a shock, quite a dreadful shock. But there still remained Alexandra. My dear, I cannot talk much of her now. I am afraid to be unjust. I don't want to judge her. And after all, what is she but a victim of her education, of her early environment, of her inheritance? Had she never meant anything to me in the past, I could pass her with a shrug, but now I have to strain all my faculties lest my former adoration for her turn into hatred. No, dear, this is not a passing disillusionment, and my love for you is not a short infatuation. You say you come from a different world. But I just want to belong to your world, not to that of Alexandra's. Alexandra's world is one of a stiff, meaningless, and heartless form. Yours is one of kindness, of naturalness. When I compare you two Alexandra appears to me as one of those intricate flowers the Chinese make of silver. It may have its beauty, but how will it affect you if what you want is a real, fragrant flower? You are the real flower. Oh, dear, but what are words, and especially how can love be expressed in words? At least, I don't know how to do it. All I can do is to repeat again and again that I love you and beg you to marry me. As for you becoming the cause of my suffering, that

is just as possible as that the rays of midsummer sun would freeze a river."

"Oh, darling, I begin to believe you, I want to believe you," said Nancy, pressing herself to Max. "And yet I am afraid. It is just because I love you so much that I am afraid. You really don't know me. One must trust a woman blindly to marry her, but how can you trust me when I do not trust myself? I am fickle, temperamental, I have no manners, I'm not the ideal you make me out to be, and I could never become such an ideal. I don't want to, I want to be just human. I don't want to break my head much over what is right or wrong. I do whatever seems to me right at the moment. It would be terrible for me to think that you credit me with virtues I do not have."

"But, darling, I credit you with nothing but with what you've admitted yourself. You are just human. I do consider you to be a very lovely representative of humanity, but I know you to be human, I want you to be human, I love you so much just for being human. You always laugh at me for saying that I love your freckles, but I do love them. If I were asked to give theoretically specifications of feminine pulchritude I would not include freckles among them. But in real life I can think of no woman who has seemed to me more beautiful or more attractive

than you do, and you wouldn't be what you are without your freckles. If you have any inner freckles I am going to love them just as I love those on the tip of your nose. You say you are fickle? I always thought that. I haven't noticed that you are temperamental, but I am ready to believe that you are. Any other defects you insist on having I am willing to grant you. I hope that you have defects, or else you wouldn't be human. But I know enough of you to know that your defects all suit me, that they make you the more adorable, just as your freckles make you more beautiful. You said that I don't have to pretend to you, and I know that this is true. And you would never have to pretend to me. I love you just as you are. I don't imagine you to be an ideal, I simply take you just as you are for my ideal. Can't you permit me to do that?"

"Oh, Max, you can talk so beautifully, you could convince anybody of anything, but, dear, one must be practical. Now, suppose we should get married, what about the Duchess? You can't just drop her. I would feel terribly toward her if I knew myself to be the cause of her abandonment by you. I am sure that she has nobody else as loyal and helpful as you are."

"You are never going to be the cause of her abandonment," answered Max. "I must tell you frankly

that my loyalty to her wasn't so great, after all, because I wish nothing more than to abandon her. Any association with her is too great an ordeal for me. Besides, she really doesn't need me. I don't believe that she loves me or ever did love me. I know that she wants to marry me, but under no circumstances am I going to marry her. The only way I could still be useful to her is by continuing to conduct her legal case, in general to supervise her affairs. But this I could do without seeing her more often than two or three times a month. But even this I could never do if I were to live in the same atmosphere as I have until now. As a matter of fact, I have made up my mind that I shall never see her again unless you want me to do so. I personally think that I have fulfilled my duty toward her and that she has no more claim on me of any kind. But you say that I can't drop her just like that. All right, I am not going to drop her, but only to please you. Even then I shall do nothing to prevent her from dropping me."

"Oh, I wouldn't demand that," Nancy said with sudden eagerness.

"Well, it looks as if we are agreed on all major points now," said Max with a happy grin. "Do you then accept my proposal, my lady?"

Nancy sighed deeply, and Max felt that she had begun to shiver.

"I still think you must see the Duchess first," she said haltingly. "And then, if you still think——"

"Dearest, I am not going to see the Duchess before and without marrying you. I have made up my mind quite definitely about it," answered Max. "So you just have to decide without thinking any more about the Duchess. Are we going to get married?"

Nancy was still shivering a little, but her eyes, which she lifted to Max, were sparkling with happiness and suppressed mischief.

"Let's do," she whispered.

For a long time Max and Nancy remained sitting on the sofa, kissing, laughing, sipping sherry and holding one of those unaccountable conversations of two enamorate beings which seem to them tremendously entertaining and important, but which they themselves could not remember on the following day. Then Max got up from the sofa and went to his desk. For a considerable time he fussed with keys and fumbled in drawers, and at last returned with a small package in his hand.

"There is one more present I want to make to you, Nance, darling," he said, taking his place again at her side and beginning to untie the package wrapped in innumerable pieces of tissue paper. "You see, we Russians have no engagement rings. We have only wedding rings, which the priest gives you in

church, and the wedding rings must be just of plain gold and without any stones or decorations. But I have one ring, one of the very few things I saved from Russia, which has always been worn for many generations by the Baronesses von Waldenscherna. It is supposed to bring luck, and I want you to have it for your engagement ring."

He managed at last to unwrap the package, a small leather case, which he opened.

"Give me your finger," he said.

Not without considerable curiosity in her hazel eyes, Nancy stretched out her finger, and Max slipped on it an old-fashioned golden ring with an intricate cluster of emeralds and diamonds.

"Oh, what a beauty!" exclaimed Nancy.

Max reverently kissed her hand.

"And it fits you perfectly," he said. "And isn't that a strange coincidence? Your stone should be the emerald. Look how beautifully that green matches the color of your hair."

"Oh, Max, but you oughtn't give such heirlooms away," said Nancy.

"You silly child, this is now as much your heirloom as it is mine, for you are the future Baroness von Waldenscherna—the only one, by the way, since I am the last representative of my family."

"Even so, in your place I'd wait at least until I'd

actually become the Baroness von Waldenscherna. Oh, dear, I won't be able to pronounce my own name correctly. But suppose something happens and we don't get married? If you let me wear this ring only for an hour I won't ever give it back to you, even if you break the engagement."

"In which case I'll be out of luck, my angel. But we say in Russia: 'One doesn't weep about the lost hair, after chopping the head off.' If I should have the misfortune of losing you I'm not going to weep over the loss of a ring."

Nancy was bending and turning her finger, watching delightedly the play in the glittering stones.

"I still can't believe it," she said pensively. "It's all so incredible—so fantastic. I certainly didn't imagine this morning that I was going to be engaged in the evening."

"Yes, isn't life strange?" agreed Max. "And to me this morning seems so far, far away. I am still as if in a different world. Oh, Nancy, dear old Nance, if you only knew how happy you make me. But when are we going to be married? Let's get married tomorrow."

"To celebrate your funeral the day after tomorrow? No, darling, if I marry I want to become a wife, not a widow, but if you want to remain alive

you'll have to stay in bed to-morrow. You look terrible."

"I do feel rather seedy. But then let's get married the first day that I'll be able to get out."

Nancy sighed deeply.

"I wish one could become husband and wife without getting married," she observed. "It just frightens me to think of a solemn ceremony with a lot of people gaping at us."

"Oh, but we don't have to have any ceremony," interrupted her Max. "Let's just have a sort of secret wedding. Two witnesses is all we need. We'll go to City Hall, then to one of the Russian churches, and then to the Russian consul to have our passport fixed. We'll make it all in two or three hours, and on the following day we'll mail the announcements. How about that?"

"Oh, that would be much better. All right, then. Let's get married the first day that you'll be able to stand on your legs again. But, dear, I still can't believe it. In any case, I keep the ring, wedding or no wedding."

"Yes, you'll certainly keep the ring, dear old Nance," answered Max, kissing tenderly one after another Nancy's fingers.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

WHEN MAX LOOKED AT HIS REFLECTION IN the mirror in Miss Jones's parlor he was astonished at his resemblance to a portrait of his great-grandfather which hung in the ancestral gallery on Max's Finnish estate. Two weeks of illness had made him much thinner and accentuated the fold between his eyebrows. This gave him the stern expression of the old Field Marshal Karl von Waldenscherna. And indeed Max felt as if he had aged by several years in the last two weeks. In a way it was astonishing. Those two weeks seemed to have been the happiest in his life. Doesn't happiness make people feel

younger? Perhaps, in certain respects. But in Max it developed a calm self-assurance and self-sufficiency which permitted him to look at everybody and everything with an Olympian tranquillity. He had all he wanted, and, outside of what he had, he needed nobody and wanted nothing. And Alexandra was now decidedly outside of his world. The fact that she made him wait in the parlor showed clearly that she was in a bad mood. A few weeks ago this alone would have made Max terribly nervous. Now he no longer cared. He paced the room, playing with his monocle, thinking of his proposed honeymoon trip abroad, and not in the least worried over Alexandra's moods. At last the butler announced that Her Imperial Highness was waiting for the Baron in her room. Max found Alexandra sitting on the sofa. She looked at him sternly and gave him her hand to kiss without getting up from the sofa.

"You may sit down," she said dryly.

Max dropped his monocle. He thought that Alexandra could at least express some regrets about his illness. He sat down and crossed his legs.

"I hope you are now well enough to resume your work," said Alexandra. "You certainly have stayed away long enough."

"You seem to resent the fact that I stayed away. I assure you I didn't get sick on purpose."

"No, I imagine not. I suppose that it was all my fault. I made you work so much that you finally collapsed," she chuckled sarcastically.

"I was indeed quite tired," Max answered dryly. "Nor do I feel so well even now. But I hope that my illness hasn't affected your affairs."

"Oh, no, my affairs can wait when the Baron chooses to get sick."

"Your attitude is surprising, not to say offensive."

"Really? Incidentally, since when do you address me as Imperial Highness?"

"Did I call you Imperial Highness?"

"I mean your letter, of course."

"My letter?" Max couldn't understand at once of what letter Alexandra was talking. Then he remembered. "Oh, you mean the letter I wrote you after I fell ill? But you must have seen that it was dictated. I couldn't very well address you in any other manner in a letter which I didn't write myself but had to dictate, could I?"

"No, I suppose you couldn't. In general you are quite willing to be on intimate terms with me as long as nobody knows it. Without witnesses you treat me as if I were your mistress. But you are very careful to keep this a secret."

"This is a peculiar complaint. Do you mean to say that I ought to have compromised you?"

"Oh, you've compromised me enough. The whole world knows that you are spending the whole day with me. This surely is compromising enough. But you don't want to compromise yourself by leaving in my hands any evidence of how you were and still are pursuing me. You let people think that I am pursuing you."

"Am I then to understand that you reproach me for not having dictated to an outsider the kind of letter that would make it appear as if you and I were on intimate terms?"

"Exactly. You are too much of a coward to acknowledge this fact. Your so-called illness has given me time to think matters over. You don't feel yourself in the least bound to me as long as I possess no evidence of your love-making. It is also significant that you became so frightfully ill just when you learned that I am free to marry you. Shocking as it often is, I prefer to see things in their real light. Now I understand that all your proposals of marriage meant nothing at all. You simply wanted to seduce me. But you never had the slightest intention of marrying me. You know perfectly well that you would have to marry me were I in possession of a letter containing but half of the words of love which you shower upon me when we are alone. Naturally, then, you don't write to me a letter of that kind. You do

even better. You pretend to be sick and write as official and cold a letter as if you weren't even personally acquainted with me. You probably expected me to announce our engagement to Miss Jones. So you very cleverly create a piece of evidence to the effect that you and I are complete strangers, and that you never as much as suspected that I could have any thoughts of marrying you."

"In other words, Your Imperial Highness desires to receive from me a love letter?"

"I think you should understand yourself that this is the only decent thing for you to do. But I know that you are far too cowardly to do it. You are afraid that I would blackmail you with it."

"I never thought you capable of blackmail. But it takes two to make a blackmail plot successful. I have never in my life paid the slightest attention to blackmailers, and I don't propose to."

"This remains to be seen."

"Naturally."

"Incidentally, who was the person to whom you dictated the letter? The handwriting looked feminine to me."

"So it was."

"Just what I thought. This, then, is that terrible illness you've suffered from. You are utterly disgusting. To think that you've kissed me with lips which

were soiled by the kisses of another woman! It makes me shudder to think about it. You haven't a trace of decency left in you. But, then, what can one expect from a man of your class? What kind of a woman is she?"

"A very lovely one."

"Ha-ha, I can imagine! So you think it is perfectly proper to be courting a duchess, and at the same time to have an affair with some vulgar creature?"

"She isn't in the least vulgar. You seem to think that vulgarity is a matter of blood. I used to think so myself, but life has taught me different. The person we are discussing is not a duchess, but neither is she in the least vulgar."

"Why won't you marry her, then?"

"Perhaps I did."

"Ha-ha-ha! This sounds probable. Baron von Waldenscherna marrying a middle-class woman! You who have lost your head so completely that you seem not quite certain whether an imperial highness would be a sufficiently good wife for you after she had married a commoner! It is utterly surprising, and indeed comical, how proud some people can be about their titles. And what title do you have? That of a baron! Ha-ha-ha, the smallest title there is!"

"Oh, no, there are baronets and plain knights who rank still lower than I do. But you are quite right. I am rather proud about my title. And I expect my wife to be proud of it, too."

"Wonderful! Perfectly wonderful! So you expect me to be very proud of becoming a Baroness von Waldenscherna?"

"I would have expected it if you were to become my wife, but that is quite impossible."

"Really? But you are very much mistaken if you think that you can make me believe all your stories about a woman you claim to have. No woman is going to have anything to do with a man like you. Besides, you are not going to get out of your obligations toward me in this manner. Frankly, I have almost decided never to see you again. Indeed, when I think of all the terrible things you have done to me, I think that you are simply too disgusting for words. But then that foolish old lawyer of mine tells me that he wouldn't know what to do without you. Also, I personally am quite ready to acknowledge the fact that you are rather clever. But it is just as I told you. You are going to obey me. I don't want any revolutions here. From now on you'll have to obey me blindly."

"You must pardon my rudeness, but if I should

obey you blindly we both would land in a lunatic asylum."

"I can't understand what has happened to you of late," said Alexandra in a less arrogant tone. "You never dared to treat me so brutally before. You were so nice to me at first." She paused. "I really cannot understand how anybody can be so immoral, so dirty as you are," she resumed in a plaintive voice. "Why couldn't you try to imitate me? I am willing to make allowances. You cannot behave just as I do, for we have a different sort of blood. But really you could try at least to imitate me." Alexandra suddenly got up from the sofa and sat down on the arm of Max's chair. "Now, really, Max, if you'd only try to become like me."

Max smiled sadly.

"You are a funny child, Alexandra. I am sorry for you, and I am in a way sorry for myself. I am very sorry for our friendship. But, dear, you always blame others, never yourself. I admit that my attitude toward you has changed. But did you ever ask yourself the question, why? Did it ever occur to you that your own attitude toward me had also something to do with it? Now you want me to imitate you. Yet you have admitted to me more than once that you haven't a very pleasant disposition. You want me to obey you blindly in business mat-

ters, but you know yourself that you understand nothing of them. As for myself, I have lived in this world for twenty-seven years and am on the whole quite pleased with myself. I assure you that I am not going to imitate you, or anybody else, except my very own self."

"That's the whole trouble with you, Max," Alexandra said with a deep sigh. "Such incredible arrogance and conceit! It is the more surprising because you ought to realize yourself how low you are morally and in every other respect. Besides, don't you really want to be in charge of my affairs? Don't you want to be my husband? Don't you want to become famous by marrying me? I am sure that you want it all, and yet you are constantly defeating your own purpose. You are a puzzling creature. Of course it is so hard for me to understand commoners."

"Now, listen, Alexandra. This talk of yours about commoners is indeed utterly ridiculous. I am not a democrat myself. If I don't like to associate with people of lower classes, it is for the plain reason that I have little in common with them. They haven't my education, they have a much narrower range of interest. I don't despise them for that or think that I am better than they are, but I know that we are different and can't be of much interest to one another. But can you please tell me in what respect

members of royalty differ from other members of the intellectual classes? If you highnesses differ from us at all, it is only in so far as your education is much poorer and your range of interest not so wide, either. You make yourself ridiculous with those constant references to your imaginary superiority."

Alexandra's eyes flashed with anger.

"Really?" she exclaimed. "Well, I'll tell you in what respect we members of royalty are superior to you commoners! We can be neither as vulgar nor as immoral as commoners, including yourself, are. Nor can we be so ill-mannered. But all of this is vain talk. You are going to obey me. I'll force you to obey me!"

"How could you do that?"

"Very simply. I'm going to ruin you unless you obey me!"

"Ruin me? Poor child! How could you possibly ruin me?"

"I'll be telling the nastiest things about you. I'll tell Miss Jones and my lawyer that you've made me your mistress!"

Max couldn't refrain from laughter.

"That is a brilliant idea," he said. "But I fail to see how this could ruin me."

"Nobody will want to speak to you after that!"

"My poor friend, you seem to forget that we are

no longer in the imperial residence of Tsarskoe Selo. I grant you that if imperial highnesses began to say nasty things about people in old-time Russia it could have sad results for the objects of their attacks. But what could you do here? Suppose you infuriate Miss Jones against me and she refuses to talk to me. I need Miss Jones, or your lawyer, or whatever other people you happen to know, as much as a dog needs a fifth leg. Outrageous as it may seem to you, I am much better known here than you are. I have my friends. I have a certain reputation. None of the people for whom I care or whom I need would be in the least affected by what Miss Jones or your lawyer might say about me."

"Oh, really—really!" panted Alexandra. She looked around helplessly and suddenly began to shriek:

"We shall see! I am going to tell everybody that you have ruined me, that you are a drunkard, that you have stolen all of my money, that you are a drug addict . . . !"

"Now, really, dear——" Max tried to interrupt her.

"Yes, I'll say all this, and a lot of other things, but I am going to ruin you unless you promise to obey me blindly!"

"I am sorry to hear you talk this way. It isn't nice,

and it is also perfectly childish. If you actually are going to say such things about me, few people will believe you, and were anybody to believe you it would affect your reputation much more than mine. I am sorry to disappoint you, but there is no way in which you could ruin me. All you can do is to convince of my iniquities your Miss Jones and a few foolish old women of the same kind. But that would not hurt me in the least."

"You are simply afraid and are trying to persuade me that I shouldn't do all this. But you are not going to persuade me. I'll prove to you that you are entirely in my power. Even if you leave me now, you'll have to come back to me, sooner or later, and then I am going to make you obey!"

"I am sorry, but nothing like that is ever going to happen. To begin with, I must tell you that I actually am married."

"What!" Alexandra jumped from her seat and looked at Max with insane eyes. "Since when are you married?" she shouted. "You're not married! I am not as foolish as you think, I won't believe it!"

"If you aren't foolish you will believe that I am married. I am married according to American civil law, and I am wedded in a Russian church, and the name of my wife is inscribed in my passport by the

Russian consul. So you can see that I am very much married."

"Stop lying for once, Max," Alexandra said in a much calmer tone. "When did you have time to get married?"

"Yesterday."

Alexandra's eyes became round. She looked at Max in bewilderment and suddenly burst into laughter.

"Oh, that's what it is?" she exclaimed. "My God! But this is a joke! Why, Max, I never thought you capable of anything like that. That was clever on your part, though. Ha-ha-ha, can you imagine?" She stopped laughing and tried to give to her face a stern expression. "But you cannot get away with this sort of thing," she snapped. "You are going to marry me. I want it!"

"Dear child, I would be highly flattered by your wish, were it not that I see only too clearly your real reason. You don't really love me, and never did. You simply hate to be Mrs. Rosenkranz and prefer to become Baroness von Waldenscherna."

"What an America you've discovered, Max. Did I ever tell you that I love you? But all of this is none of your concern. I told you that I am going to make you obey."

"And I told you that you'll never succeed, and our

first tryout of arms seems to have been a rather sad defeat for you, my dear. How do you still expect to marry me now that I am married?"

"Oh, I should worry about that. I'm going to have you divorced. I'll let your wife know a few things which no woman would tolerate."

"She knows all there is to be known."

"Possibly, but she doesn't know what I am going to tell her. You imagine that you have won the first battle. I doubt it very much. Just wait until I start talking."

"Now, really, dear, I repeat again that you can talk your head off without causing me the slightest harm. But I wish you wouldn't do it, because you certainly are going to spoil your own reputation."

"Ha-ha-ha, much do I care about my reputation. You may be clever, but not quite as clever as you think you are. Your very anxiety to prevent me from telling things about you is the best proof that you know yourself that I can ruin you."

"I've told you before that you often misjudge people. You won't believe me that whatever I've done to your advantage, I've done out of purs friendship and personal devotion to you."

"You were married yesterday also out of pure devotion to me."

"I was careful to say 'whatever I've done to your

advantage.' I don't consider my marriage to be to your advantage. Even then I did it only after it became quite clear to me that you and I could never be happy together. But this is too painful a subject to discuss in detail. I am willing to take all the blame upon myself and give you the most inoffensive reason of all. I could never marry a woman who has no respect for my name."

"And your present wife has it. This is natural if you have chosen a scrubwoman for your wife. I must grant you that you've invented a new form of snobbism. Generally snobs try to marry above their own station so as to be admitted into higher circles, but you marry below your status so as to have your wife melt from happiness at being a baroness. That is decidedly original."

"I am glad if it is. I value originality in others. I should be highly pleased to be original myself. As for our respective stations, I must tell you, Alexandra, that I do not consider the Lichtenfelsens to be in any way superior to the Waldenschernas. My ancestors were barons and practically sovereigns long before anybody had heard of yours. But this is beside the point. I would have married, and did marry, not a title, but a woman, and you are not the type of woman I would like to marry."

"Indeed! Nor are you the type of man I would

like to marry. But as you said correctly yourself, such a marriage would suit my convenience. I am not going to stoop so low as to beg you to marry me, but I am going to force you to marry me. I may divorce you shortly afterwards and permit you to go back to your scrubwoman."

"You are delightfully kind and most charitable. You are free to do as you please. But I am giving you the last warning. The more you talk, the more you affect your reputation."

"Ha-ha-ha, how terribly solicitous you suddenly became in regard to my reputation. But you've told me yourself that foreigners can be deported from the United States for moral turpitude, and now you are afraid that when my accusations against you reach the government, you will be deported!"

This time it was Max who couldn't refrain from laughter.

"Dearest, you're talking nonsense now," he said. "Nobody is going to deport me, nor even you. In fact, nothing is going to happen, except that you are going to put yourself in a very awkward position. But after all, this is entirely your own business."

"I should say it is."

"Is there anything else you want to talk to me about?"

"I don't think so. Why do you ask?"

"Because if this is all, I would like, with your permission, to go home."

"You haven't learned yet that one doesn't ask an imperial highness's permission to go home?"

"Indeed, I forgot all about it. But, the situation being what it is, I don't see why my presence could be in the least pleasant to you, while I myself could use this time to advantage, since I have a lot of work to do."

"Really? I can well imagine the kind of work you want to do. At any rate, if your presence were disagreeable to me, I should not hesitate to tell you so. In the meantime your scrubwoman can wait."

"My dear, I am not going to give you pleasure by paying any attention to this kind of insults, but I really have a lot of work at home, and you seem to have nothing important to discuss, so I am afraid I'll have to go home anyway."

"You can't go home without taking leave of me, can you? And I'm not going to give you leave."

"Then I'll have to go without it."

"And then you'll never see me again!" shouted Alexandra, jumping up from the sofa, her eyes glittering.

"Now, can't you really be sensible?" Max asked pleadingly. "Oh, child, I feel so sorry that our

friendship has developed into this. Can't we just be friends and forget all this comedy?"

"We can't. Sit down!" she shouted, seeing Max get up. "Sit down, or you'll never see me again!"

"Now, do try to be sensible. I really must go home, because I have a lot of work to do. You know perfectly well that I don't mean to insult you. As a matter of fact, it is a pure caprice on your part that you do not want to let me go."

"But you can't go without saying good-bye to me," she said, in such a plaintive voice and with such a pitiful look in her big brown eyes that all of Max's former tenderness for his little kitten suddenly flared up in him again.

"I'm not going to leave you without saying good-bye," he said in a low voice, and taking her by the shoulders kissed her gently on the mouth. She threw her arms around his neck and began to kiss him passionately. Then Max kissed her hand, stroked tenderly her hair, and said: "Good-bye."

"You can't go without my permission," she said.

"Now, Alexandra, be sensible."

"I won't. If you dare to go now you'll have nobody but yourself to blame for the consequences."

"Child, aren't you sick of all that grandiloquence? Now, be reasonable. Let us part in peace, and I'll come to you gladly whenever you really need me. I'll

be glad to help you as much as I can until all your affairs are straightened out, and then, with all your millions, you'll have no trouble in finding a much better husband than I could ever be. But I really must go now."

Once more he kissed her hand and went to the door.

"I didn't tell you good-bye," Alexandra repeated obstinately.

"Now, really, dear, stop it," said Max, no longer able to hide his annoyance.

"It will have the gravest consequences for you!" shouted Alexandra.

"So much the worse, then, but I must go. Good-bye, dear"; and Max left the room.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

SOME THREE WEEKS AFTER THEIR WEDDING Nancy and Max entered the fashion store of Madame Maria Georgievna Nekrassova. They found in the store the usual crowd, including the "butterfly" Madame Piskulina and the unavoidable Ivan Ivanovich Burachkoff. The appearance of the Baron and Baroness von Waldenscherna caused considerable excitement. During these weeks the newly-weds had been the main subject of conversation in the Russian colony in New York, but not a single Russian had as yet seen the mysterious Baroness. Murochka

rushed to meet them with her most charming smile.

"How nice of you to have come!" she exclaimed. "Why, Baroness, I've heard so much about you and was so anxious to make your acquaintance, but one doesn't see you anywhere. Why weren't you at the Russian Ball? Everybody there talked of nothing but you."

"Oh, I didn't know that there was a Russian Ball," said Nancy. "Did you, Max?"

"I don't believe I did. That is, I can remember receiving some sort of invitation, but you know I never attend those affairs."

"You naturally wouldn't!" exclaimed Murochka. "You know, my dear Baroness, your husband and I have been friends for years, and I came to know him very well indeed." She cast a malicious glance at the unfortunate Burachkoff, who blushed and frowned. "So, if you want any information about your husband, you must always ask me. I can tell you a lot of things about him. For the present I'll merely say that he's an intolerable snob. You know, he considers barons alone to be human. Of course, he wouldn't mix with ordinary refugees, even though the ball was presided over by Duchess Irina Mihailovna von Lichtenfelsen. Incidentally, I had a very interesting conversation with the Duchess about you, Max. I hope you don't mind it, my dear Baroness, that I am

calling your husband Max, but we're such old friends——"

"No, she doesn't mind it," said Max. "Nancy knows all about our friendship. I've told her a great deal about you."

Murochka blushed a little. Apparently she didn't like his remark and the manner in which he blinked at her with one eye.

"So your name is Nancy?" she exclaimed. "What a beautiful name, and sounds so sort of aristocratic, just matches your title perfectly. Baroness Nancy von Waldenscherna. Yes, yes, my dear Baroness, you and your husband are on everybody's lips."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Nancy with a charming smile. "At least the Russian colony has now a really worthy subject of conversation."

The Russians in the store exchanged indignant glances.

"But your husband," resumed Murochka, "is getting quite a romantic reputation. So are you, as a matter of fact. It is no mean accomplishment to hand the raspberry to a duchess and an imperial highness."

"Did I do that?"

"Oh, but don't you know it? I think it is just modesty on your part. Why, my dear, that's what everybody is talking about. They say that Duchess

Alexandra Petrovna is sick and broken-hearted, and all because of you. Duchess Irina told me: 'She must be a raving beauty, that Baroness von Waldenscherna. I've never known anybody who worshiped titles so much as Max does. A commoner whom Max preferred to an imperial highness must be a living incarnation of Venus.' And I see that this is indeed the fact."

"I *am* sort of beautiful, ain't I?" said Nancy. She looked at Max, and they both could no longer restrain themselves, and burst into laughter. Murochka's face expressed mild annoyance. Obviously those two were as yet in that stage of calf's love when people simply refuse to be provoked.

"Yes, Irina has made the right guess," said Max. "Nancy is certainly so much more beautiful than any duchess I've ever met. As for titles, she, being a baroness, is now senior in rank to both Mrs. Rosenkranz and Mrs. Brooks. Tell Irina that next time you meet her. However, we came here not only to pay you our compliments, but also to buy that shawl you have in the window."

"That's better still!" exclaimed Murochka. "Why, Max, you are getting extravagant. True, this shawl isn't quite so expensive, and besides, I have made a special price for this week, for I don't seem to be able to sell anything. Even then it costs fifteen dol-

lars. But you know, Baroness, your husband once bought here a shawl for Duchess Alexandra and paid forty-five dollars for it. I think you ought to watch him."

"Oh, I do watch him," said Nancy. "Now, you see, he is beginning already to buy shawls for me."

"Besides, I fooled you a bit with that other shawl," said Max. "I got the credit for buying it, but to tell you the truth it was the Duchess herself who paid for it."

"Now, think of that," said Murochka indignantly. "This is really an outrage. And I thanking him and permitting him to take me out that afternoon!"

"He always takes advantage of defenseless girls, doesn't he?" said Nancy.

Murochka bit her lip and rushed to get the shawl.

"This time I'm paying you my own hard-earned money," said Max. "Well, good-bye, dear. Drop in some day to see us. You may yet find your shawl on a painting. Incidentally, I'm soon having an exhibition, and something tells me that I'm going to make quite some money on it. In which case we'll go for a while to Europe."

"You lucky people," sighed Murochka.

As soon as the door closed behind the Baron and

Baroness von Waldenscherna, the little store began to buzz with excited voices.

"What did he see in that freckled creature?" roared Madame Piskulina.

"Some Venus!" exclaimed Murochka.

"A vulgar American girl," said Burachkoff. "Why, she must have no education at all. Did you hear her say 'ain't'? But imagines herself a baroness, neither more nor less. Turns up her nose at everybody. Is glad that the Russian colony has now a worthy subject of conversation, if you please."

"Well, you can't expect much sense of humor in an American," said Murochka. "The poor woman seemed to have never understood that I was making fun of her."

"No, indeed, she seemed quite pleased. Ah, but Americans are all so dumb," observed Burachkoff. "But can it really be true that this duchess wanted to marry the Baron and that he preferred this red-haired creature to the Duchess?"

"Can it be true!" exclaimed Murochka. "Why, my dear, it was Duchess Irina herself who told me the whole story. Not only did Duchess Alexandra Petrovna want to marry Waldenscherna, but she has actually been his mistress, and he has robbed her of her whole fortune and then deserted her for the sake of that beauty of his. I admit that I am com-

pletely baffled. I never expected anything like that from Max."

"Every baron has his own fancy," said Madame Piskulina. "But this is certainly the most fanciful fancy I've seen yet."

"He's simply sold himself to the Jews," declared Burachkoff.

And, although the logic of this conclusion was not exactly apparent, everybody in the store seemed to agree with him. Ivan Ivanovich chuckled with self-satisfaction. It is always gratifying to have the last word in an important debate.

THE END

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